see, i can fly (better than you thought)

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/74480636.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/F
Fandoms:	零～zero～ | Fatal Frame (Video Game 2001), Zero: Akai Chou | Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly, Zero: Shisei no Koe | Fatal Frame III: The Tormented, 零 濡鴉ノ巫女 | Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water, 零 | Project Zero | Fatal Frame (Video Games)
Relationships:	Kozukata Yuri/Kurosawa Hisoka, Hinasaki Miku/Kurosawa Rei
Characters:	Kozukata Yuri, Kurosawa Hisoka, Hinasaki Miu, Amakura Mio, Hinasaki Miku, Kurosawa Rei, Amakura Kei
Additional Tags:	stone mirror AU, Post-Canon, Horror, Hurt/Comfort, Angst, Supernatural Elements, Psychic Abilities, Echoes of the Past, Found Family, Families of Choice, Family Feels, Canon-Typical Violence, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Song: Chou (Tsuki Amano)
Language:	English
Series:	Part 14 of of stone mirrors and second chances
Stats:	Published: 2025-11-22 Completed: 2025-12-20 Words: 77,936 Chapters: 9/9

see, i can fly (better than you thought)

by Rain13121

Summary

Your arms that held me back turned to soft dust
And I just silently looked up at the sky

Miu wants to know about the past. About her mothers' pasts, about her bloodline's past, about everything that set their harrowing fates with the supernatural into motion. The connections run deep. Far deeper than they appear on the surface. They're all connected. She wants to understand.

To do so, she's going to have to go back. Back to the beginning.

The Himuro Mansion holds the answers she seeks.

Part of the *of stone mirrors and second chances* series (Can be read separately, but reading *once more (with feeling)* first helps with a lot of the references)

Chapter 1: Himuro

Chapter Notes

Hi! Welcome back!

Sorry about the long delay again :') This was another one that got away from me and turned out way longer than intended.

First off, I know what you're thinking: "Chou is FF2's song, what is it doing with a story about FF1/MOBW?!" To this I say: they're all connected! It will make sense as we go along! Hopefully! This one got a little jumbled in my head while I was writing, so hopefully it all still makes sense...

Secondly, there's a lot of echoes and shadows to be read in this fic as our girls explore the past! As per the usual, they'll be written in *italics*. Sometimes the girls react to things while seeing the echoes. I left that in italics too.

Thirdly, we've got two very similar romanized character names running amok here, causing mind chaos. I had to be very mindful about watching my U's and O's.

All that aside...

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yuri wakes to the familiar sight of the antique shop’s office ceiling above her head.

She must have dozed off.

She's resting in a warm lap with gentle fingers carding through her hair, stroking in a soft and soothing cadence. She's content and cozy where she is, but most importantly, she feels completely safe.

It's tempting to fall right back to sleep.

Instead, blinking muzzily, she tilts her head back, sneaking a look up at the woman holding her.

Watching silently as Hisoka reads, she takes in the way her gaze wanders across the page. The way her lips subtly mouth the words. The way she scrunches her brow just slightly in concentration. This close she can see the silver in dark blue eyes, shining in the light beneath long, dark lashes. She lets her gaze trace down the elegant slope of her nose, the graceful curve of her face, the faint scar on her cheek and just above her eyebrow, her beauty mark,

the bow of her lips, studying them all as Hisoka breathes. She's completely engrossed, just barely forming recognizable syllables, lost in the words and the worlds they describe–

"Stop that."

Hisoka's voice almost startles her.

Okay, maybe not *completely* engrossed.

Gaze flickering back up from perfect lips, Yuri finds Hisoka's eyes have narrowed slightly, crinkling just a bit at the corners. She's trying not to smile. Her gaze remains firmly fixed on her page, but the enamored staring clearly caught her attention.

"Stop what?" Yuri feigns innocence, tilting her head as she looks up at her upside down, maybe batting her eyelashes a little bit. She knows the answer, but she's not likely to stop anytime soon.

Her love is so gorgeous.

Hisoka's eyes shift down to meet hers. Her amused smirk finally fully appears, fond but scolding. She gently sets her book down–

Right on Yuri's face.

"You know what."

"Woah." Yuri blinks as the world darkens in front of her eyes, her eyelashes brushing against the paper of the pages. The text is entirely too close to read. "Spoilers."

"You would not be interested in this story," Hisoka chuckles, pulling her book back and then shifting. She settles so that the book is held neatly in front of her face as she returns to her reading, hiding herself from Yuri's adoring view.

Yuri pouts.

Stretching and shifting with her, she rolls over onto her stomach and then squirms until she's draped more fully on top of Hisoka. She winds her arms underneath her, burying them beneath Hisoka's shirt, and then pulls her closer, burying her face against her warm belly.

"Why not?" Her voice comes out somewhat muffled. She lifts her head, peeking beneath the book to catch Hisoka's gaze again. "Is it a romance?"

Hisoka indulges her, peeking back. She mumbles, slightly chagrined. "Maybe..."

"Oh..." Yuri hums thoughtfully. Her eyes brighten as she perks up. "Are they like us?"

Hisoka's expression softens. She cups Yuri's face, stroking a thumb over her cheek. "...Yes."

"Then I might like it..." Yuri takes a closer look at the cover of the book, trying to glean something about the story. The cover is pretty ambiguous. It looks innocent enough, but

something about it... "Oh, is it one of your smut stories?"

Hisoka's soft expression scrunches. She instantly turns red and hides behind her book again. "*No*, it is not."

"Liar," Yuri giggles. She paws at the book, trying to see what's written on the pages inside. Hisoka holds it away from her, far out of her reach. "Wait, let me see! I might need new ideas."

Her world goes dark again as Hisoka gently covers her eyes, this time with her palm. She furrows her brow in confusion but doesn't move.

She's rewarded with a tender kiss on the lips. It steals her breath away.

Hisoka's whisper sounds amused again but a little breathless too. "You do not..."

Well, now Yuri is *extra* curious.

The door to the office swings open, creaking loudly on its hinges. The sound startles them both, but they don't fully pull away.

"Hey, are you two free today..." Miu starts and then trails off, holding the last syllable dramatically. Yuri can almost hear the unimpressed look on her face, envisioning it behind Hisoka's palm. "Am I interrupting?"

Using the distraction to peek out from behind Hisoka's hand, Yuri slowly reaches for the book again.

Hisoka notices her out of the corner of her vision and holds the book even further away. She catches Yuri by the back of her head and pulls her down against her chest with an exasperated grin. "No. Did you need something?"

Yuri grins at Miu from where she's trapped, completely unbothered in her predicament. "Hisoka was just about to let me read her book!"

Hisoka huffs a laugh. She tugs the starry throw blanket down from its place on the back of the couch and pulls it over Yuri's head, ignoring her muffled protests. "I most certainly was not."

Miu chuckles as well, crossing her arms across her chest as she watches them. She raises an eyebrow teasingly. "Why, is it another one of your smut stories?"

Hisoka's jaw drops incredulously as she glares back at her. "No!"

"That's what I asked too!" Yuri pipes up from beneath the blanket.

"Oh, then it totally is," Miu laughs as she reaches for the book herself.

Hisoka snaps it shut when her hand gets close. "It is not!" Then she groans in annoyance, "You two are practically unbearable together."

"Aww," Miu chuckles as she tries once more to steal a peek at her book. Hisoka tucks it firmly between her side and the couch, keeping it hidden from view. "But you *love* us, big sister."

Hisoka rolls her eyes but doesn't deny it.

Then she frowns. Peeking out from beneath the blanket, Yuri falls still as well.

They both watch Miu closely as she turns away to idly meander about the office, perusing the bookshelf as if she's actually interested in the heavy historical tomes lined up upon it. She's not. They both know it.

Beneath Miu's nonchalant demeanor is something anxious. She's on edge. They can see it. They can *feel* it.

“Miu…” Hisoka starts carefully, keeping her tone light and even. "Is everything alright?"

"Hm?" Miu glances back over her shoulder at them, a perfect mask of composure neatly in place to conceal her emotions. At the concerned looks on their faces, she quickly recalls her facades don't work on them. She hesitates and then scrunches her nose. "Sometimes I forget that I'm not the only one who can do that anymore. It's honestly kind of annoying."

Easing the blanket down from her head, Yuri glances at Hisoka worriedly. Hisoka returns the look with one of her own, combing her fingers through Yuri's hair to tame it back into place. Then they both turn back to Miu.

"Miu..."

Miu finally sighs, rocking on her heels as she turns to fully face them. "So, there's this place I want to check out. It used to be haunted."

Yuri and Hisoka share another glance.

At least she's honest.

"It's not anymore," Miu quickly amends. Then her gaze falls to the floor. She shrugs, trying to remain honest but feeling immensely vulnerable. It's truly a testament to how far she's come and how much she trusts them that she's willing to let her walls down for them like this. "Will you come too? I...feel better going if you two are with me."

"Of course." Hisoka doesn't miss a beat. She doesn't need to look at Yuri again to know she's thinking the same thing. She smiles gently, watching the tension ease away from the younger girl now that she knows they've got her. "When?"

Miu gives her a crooked grin, suddenly sheepish. She scratches awkwardly at her cheek and averts her eyes back to the bookshelf. "... Now?"

Hisoka and Yuri share another perplexed look before turning back to her.

"Now? How are we going to get there?"

"I got us a ride." Miu shrugs again. "She's waiting for us out back."

"*Miu*," Hisoka almost-but-not-quite scolds as she and Yuri scramble to untangle from the couch. "Why didn't you tell us sooner?"

"I'm sorry, I got nervous!"

"How long has she been out there?"

"I don't know, not too long..."

Rising to her feet, Yuri can feel a familiar sensation from the bag slung over Miu's shoulder. She tilts her head, frowning as she interrupts their bickering. "I thought you said it wasn't haunted."

"It's not." Miu answers quickly, turning towards her. "It hasn't been for a long time."

"You have the spirit flashlight." Yuri can see the apprehension building in Miu's eyes, as if she's scared they're going to change their mind. Letting her expression soften, she gives her a reassuring but playful grin. "I just need to know if I should grab the Camera Obscura too."

Miu relaxes again as well. "We shouldn't need it, but... it wouldn't hurt. I grabbed the flashlight just in case. I was really hoping you'd come, but I also know you're kind of a ghost magnet, so..."

Yuri's expression remains amused but turns unimpressed. "Rude."

Hisoka sighs, placing a hand on her forehead as she shakes her head. "Give us just a moment to gather everything, and we'll be right out. Don't take off without us. Tell our driver we're sorry for making her wait."

"Don't worry, she understands," Miu chuckles. "She figured I'd be in here for a moment. She's the one who encouraged me to come get you."

"Thank her anyway," Hisoka gently insists, tugging Yuri by the hand towards the door that leads upstairs. "We'll be right down."

Yuri sees Miu shaking her head fondly before the door closes behind them.

Up in their room, Yuri and Hisoka throw together an overnight bag packed with everything they might need for a long expedition– extra clothes, their first aid kit, a handful of helpful tools, various films, and the Camera Obscura. They neglected to ask Miu how far away their destination is, but if it requires a driver, it must not be anywhere nearby. Miu claims it's not haunted, but if it truly was at some point, then the place is bound to be rife with heavy shadows and echoes. It never hurts to be prepared.

After making sure all the windows are closed and the doors are locked, they make their way out back to the alley behind the cafe. They're greeted once more by Miu, waiting patiently for them. This time, she stands accompanied by their driver.

"Mio?" Hisoka blinks in surprise at the younger Amakura leaning back against her car. She is decidedly not who they had expected to see. "Hey."

"Hey," Mio chuckles at her surprise as she pulls her down into a hug. Hisoka is taller than her now that she's all grown up. She's closer in height to Rei, only a little shorter. "I'm glad you two are coming," then she mutters a bit quieter, just barely audible, "She'll need her big sister..."

"I heard that," Miu grumbles as she helps Yuri toss their bag in the trunk. "I can handle it just fine if they don't want to go..."

"We're going," Hisoka reasserts, glancing sharply at Miu out of the corner of her eye as Mio releases her.

Mio has a small, knowing smile as she glances between them, but there's also a glint of uncertainty in her eyes. She seems to be wavering, as if she's unsure if she's doing the right thing. Catching Yuri staring worriedly, her expression relaxes. She motions towards the car. "Alright then, everyone load up. Make sure to put on your seatbelts."

"Why?" Miu chuckles, raising an eyebrow challengingly. She slips into the front passenger seat and tugs on her seat belt while Yuri and Hisoka climb into the back. Hisoka settles in the middle while Yuri sits behind Miu. "I've ridden with you before. You're not that scary of a driver. We trust you."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence." Mio grins as she settles in the driver's seat and turns over the ignition. A quick glance over her shoulder ensures the girls in the back are complying with her request as well. "But I'd really prefer not to be on your mother's shovel list alongside my uncle. She takes car safety very seriously..."

Miu and Hisoka titter, nodding in understanding.

Yuri looks between them, tilting her head in perturbed confusion.

A shovel list? Rei's or Miku's?

Is *she* on the shovel list?

"Yuri." Mio glances back at her through the rearview mirror as she pulls out into the main road. Familiar shops begin to roll past as she heads for the way out of town. She's clearly stifling an affectionate laugh, eyes fond but filled with mirth. "Relax. You're not on it. Though you would have been if Mama Kitty had thought you were bad for her baby..."

Ah.

"Makes sense."

"*No*." Hisoka snaps her head towards her to give her an upset look. Then she mutters more quietly, fidgeting with Yuri's fingertips as she discreetly takes her hand, "You could never be bad for me..."

"Well, yeah, but if I was, I'd understand why Rei would want to hit me with a shovel."

Hisoka makes a small, frustrated sound, fur ruffled and puffed up like an angry kitten. Her tail would certainly be swishing in annoyance if she had one. Yuri presses a kiss into her knuckles to soothe her, giving her a sweet, doting smile filled with warmth and devotion. Hisoka wavers and then deflates with a soft huff.

Mio and Miu share a look. Miu rolls her eyes. Mio shakes her head.

"And that's why she'll never be on the shovel list..."

***

On the long drive to...wherever it is that they're going...Miu and Mio have been gently arguing. Hisoka and Yuri have been looking on from the back seat, sharing confused and concerned glances. They've been on the road for several hours now, but they're still none the wiser as to where they're going or, more importantly, *why*.

"I didn't want to drag them into it," Miu mutters to Mio, her arms crossed defensively in front of her. "Their very worst memories happened there. I just want to find out what happened on my own. You didn't have to agree to come, you know..."

Mio keeps her eyes fixed on the road as they cut deeply through a lush green forest. The roads are getting successively less paved, slowly turning to gravel and then nothing more than overgrown dirt pathways. "It's not that. You know I want to be here. I just also want you safe." She glances at Miu out of the corner of her eye and then at Hisoka through the mirror before setting her gaze back on the road. "You're both so much like Rei. Her stubbornness, her drive... Once your heart is set, nothing can change it."

Miu pouts, furrowing her brow. "You say it like it's a bad thing."

Mio titters, fond but wistful and a little weary. "No, I don't. I just know how it works. I know Rei. And because of that, I also know that you'd end up finding another way if I didn't go with you. And I'd still be worried. That being said, I still think we should have at least warned–"

"No." Miu cuts her off again insistently. "It's better this way. I don't want it to hurt them any worse than it already has."

She sounds so adamant, but beneath the surface, Yuri can sense she's worried too;
Miu is still so afraid of disappointing the people she loves. She's worried about her. Hisoka squeezes her hand, offering comfort, but between their intertwined fingers, Yuri can sense she's just as concerned.

They take Mio's car as far up the trail as they possibly can. When it's clear that it won't make it any farther, they decide to walk the rest of the way. As they're getting out of the car, Hisoka tugs on Yuri. They share another look. Yuri nods, knowing what she's asking without words.

While Hisoka gets out on the driver's side with Mio, Yuri pulls Miu aside as she's stepping out from the passenger seat. "Miu... Does this have anything to do with that spirit inside Mio?"

She's spoken to Miu about it several times. About the spirit they can both feel residing inside of Mio. Miu says Mio doesn't know it's there and that the spirit wants it to remain that way– for Mio's sake. Yuri doesn't know what to think. It's not a malicious spirit, she's certain of that much. It's like it's part of Mio's soul somehow.

She's asked Hisoka about it too. Hisoka has known Mio since she was a child. Hisoka mentioned Mio lost someone she was very close to when she was young, a sister, but she's not certain about much more than that. The spirit keeps itself well hidden from even the most powerful of psychic abilities, so it's hard to investigate much further– not without possibly alerting or worse, hurting Mio anyway.

Hisoka did say she once had an odd experience when she was spending time with Mio as a child though. It involved a terrifying nightmare and being soothed by a red butterfly, like the one branded onto Mio's throat. In the dream, she thinks she remembers seeing a girl who looked just like Mio but somehow wasn't, just for a moment. She always chalked it up to just that though– a nightmare, a conclusion that Rei seemed to corroborate.

Lately though, more and more, they've both been starting to wonder...

Miu hesitates, standing on her tiptoes to peek over the roof of the car. Hisoka is talking with Mio, keeping her distracted. She quickly turns back to Yuri, muttering to her under her breath. "Yes. No. Sort of. She deserves to know."

"I thought the spirit didn't want her to find out." Yuri keeps her voice just as hushed, glancing through the window to make sure they're not overheard. Hisoka and Mio are moving towards the trunk, likely to retrieve the Camera Obscura and maybe a few supplies from their bag.

Miu shakes her head, her expression distraught, almost pained. "No, not that. She deserves to know about the connection between–"

"Having second thoughts?"

Mio's voice startles them. She gives them a crooked grin in apology. Hisoka is rocking on her heels beside her, a sheepish look on her face and the Camera Obscura in her hands. She hands the camera to Yuri as she comes to stand beside her.

Miu gives Mio a grumpy look. She pulls her shoulders back, standing proud and stubborn. "*No*. We're going."

Raising an eyebrow, Mio gives her an amused look in return but doesn't say anything more. There's something knowing shining in her eyes again.

Miu sighs and deflates.

"I know... 'just like Mama.' Let's just go before it gets dark."

***

According to the map Miu procured from her satchel bag– a faded and tattered old parchment with hand-drawn symbols scrawled across it– their destination shouldn't be too much farther. The path forward is growing fainter and even more overgrown, but they can just barely make it out beneath the thick underbrush. They stay close as they make their way down it, keeping an eye on each other the entire way.

The deeper in they get, the denser the forest becomes until it's strangling out almost all of the sunlight overhead. The trees aren't the only thing getting denser though. There's something out there, deep in the woods, something resonating with heavy and dangerous shadows. They're moving towards it. The echoes are growing more intense as they proceed down the trail. Whatever it is must be their destination– this "formally haunted" place Miu has her heart set on investigating.

Yuri's anxiety is building, growing stronger with each step they take closer to it. Even from a distance, the echoes are nearly enough to make her nauseous. The ones on the mountain had been undeniably powerful, but they were also somewhat diffused in comparison, dark, heavy, and persisting but cast over an immense area. The ones they are moving towards now are condensed and compressed, sinking deep into the surface of the plane of the living like the singularity of a black hole.

She clings to Hisoka, clutching her hand as they move towards it. Hisoka can clearly feel it too. She holds on to her just as tightly in return, refusing to let go.

After a long hike, a deteriorating structure comes into view, worn and weathered from decades of standing stoic and abandoned. The echoes are reverberating out of its front gate, channeling through it and out into the forest like a tuning fork. The gate itself is not the source of the darkness, however. The source lies somewhere deep within what's behind it.

Looming behind an imposing wall is a sprawling complex at least as big as the Shrine of the Ephemeral, if not bigger. The air the site permeates makes Yuri shudder. Miu is right; it's not haunted anymore.

But it definitely *was* at one point– unfathomably so.

The fading darkness is suffocating from the outside. She can't imagine what it will be like within.

They only linger for a moment at the gate, staring up in apprehension. Then, they all share one last look and press forward, maintaining their careful vigilance as they go. The front door is wound in the remains of what appear to be ceremonial ropes. It looks to be barely functional, hanging brokenly on its hinges. Pulling out the spirit flashlight to light the way, they slip past it and into a dilapidated entrance area.

The interior is in ruins.

Several beams have collapsed from the ceiling and are strewn across the foyer, crushing the wooden flooring in some areas and piercing entirely through it in others. A gaping hole lies

in the very center of the room, so dark and deep that they can't see the bottom.

The mansion has clearly seen better days.

The echoes around them are so loud and heavy, it's hard to remember that they're just echoes. Yuri's body jolts, twitching as her vision flickers monochrome, color fading in and out. The old house's memories are attempting to tell her their tale– *forcibly*. Distorted screams and wails ring distantly in her ears. Faint shadows are twisting in her peripherals, fleeing from something in terror, clawing desperately at the once impassable entryway. Their efforts had gone in vain.

Years ago, Yuri would have crumpled under the immense strain of so much darkness. Today, she can face it. Not comfortably, but she's strong enough to persevere.

Hisoka squeezes her hand again, steadying her. She can sense the echoes through their shared touch. She's trying her best to balance the burden.

They're both shaking and pale, silently wondering the same question.

"Miu," Yuri starts, drawing her best friend's attention. Miu has already stepped further in and is about to ascend to the landing the deep hole has nearly destroyed. She turns back towards her at the call of her name. "Why are we here?"

Miu opens her mouth as if she's going to respond but stops when she takes in Yuri's present state. Her shoulders fall, expression shifting to something genuinely remorseful and deeply concerned. "Oh, Yuri... I shouldn't... I shouldn't have brought you here."

Yuri's expression darkens. Her eyes narrow as she scowls. "I'm going to smack you."

Miu blinks in surprise, fighting her instinct to turn cold and defensive– she knows without a doubt that Yuri would never hurt her. Clearly, however, she struck a nerve. "For bringing you?"

"For even considering leaving me behind."

Miu's confusion immediately shifts back to guilt. "That's not what I meant. I just don't want you hurt."

"I know," Yuri mumbles under her breath, shifting closer to Hisoka. She's still hurt, but she's trying to brush it off. She doesn't need to be coddled. She can handle herself and this just fine.

Hisoka looks between the two worriedly. She remains quiet but holds Yuri's hand tighter. Mio has a distant, sad look on her face as she looks between all three of them. There's something shining in her eyes, the ghost of a memory perhaps, but she remains silent as well.

With the mood already somber, they look towards Miu expectantly, waiting for her to finally explain.

Miu sighs, turning from them as she ascends the stairs. She calls back to them over her shoulder as they all follow close behind.

"Long ago, this place used to be the home of a very powerful family. The family master was a major landowner with control over the whole–"

As she's passing an old, melted-down candle on a metal stand, an intense echo interrupts her. It's powerful enough that it overwhelms their senses, and they all see it: the candle suddenly flares violently, a white flame from the past erupting from its wick for a brief second before disappearing again.

Miu yelps. Drawing back, she presses her hand down over her heart.

Her fright only lasts a moment. It's quickly overtaken by irritation. She swears at it under her breath, eyeing it with disdain.

Yuri stares at Miu as she composes herself, her expression completely deadpan. Then, without warning or explanation, she steps forward and pushes the candle over. It falls to the ground with a muted clatter.

The unexpected act breaks the tension. The other three women giggle softly.

"You were saying?"

Miu relaxes again, letting her guard fall. She smiles up at her fondly. Despite her concerns, she still always feels safest with Yuri at her side. "It'll be easier if I just show you. You've got Hisoka?"

Yuri glances back at her love. Hisoka meets her gaze, stepping closer again. She nods in understanding. Yuri turns back to Miu and nods as well. They both know what that means.

Miu turns to Mio next. Tentatively, she holds out her hand. Mio tilts her head curiously but doesn't hesitate in taking it.

"As long as we're touching, I can show you the echoes," Miu explains nervously. "You'll see everything I see. Is that... okay?"

Mio noticeably stiffens. Yuri can tell Miu is fighting not to stiffen too as she holds Mio's gaze. There's something intense in Mio's eyes, something knowing, something... *sad*. A hidden pain.

The spirit residing inside her looks just like her. Yuri wonders if it adopted the image– like the spirits of the Maidens of Black Water would sometimes adopt the image of their victims' loved ones– or if maybe it always looked that way.

Either way, whoever the spirit is– *was*– it loves Mio dearly. It wants more than anything to protect her. Now it would seem it has the power to do just that.

Its sixth sense feels powerful, more so than Mio's. Yuri wonders if Mio has ever experienced that sixth sense through the spirit.

The pained look on her face suggests she has.

Mio finally nods, remaining silent, but holds onto Miu without wavering.

Miu lets out a breath through pursed lips, idly nodding in return. "This place was built on a rift– a Hell Gate, like the Shadowspring."

Yuri and Hisoka share an uneasy look. They have a feeling they know where this is going.

"Ren and I have this theory," Miu continues, turning from Mio to look around apprehensively. "We don't think these rifts just suddenly came into existence on their own. Maybe the line between was already thin, but I think it was people, living people, who tore them open all the way. Maybe from longing for someone or wanting something so viscerally that it ripped through the layers. Maybe it was love. Maybe it was power or prosperity. But in the end, they tore them open and made it so others had to suffer and sacrifice to contain them, perpetually paying for the sins of those who came before them, deeming it 'their duty' to do so."

Mio watches her carefully, her brow furrowed in perturbation. "Makes sense." Her gaze falls to the rotting floorboards beneath them. "Daughters paying for the sins of their fathers."

Miu squeezes her hand, trying to comfort her. Yuri can feel the sorrow bleeding off of Mio from where she stands. Miu is being so brave; she must be taking the brunt of it as she holds onto her.

"The gate here was sealed a long time ago," Miu whispers sadly. There's something knowing in her eyes too as she looks at Mio, as if she finally understands where her sadness stems from. "I just want to know what happened."

As if answering her request, their vision suddenly turns to greyscale. Another echo begins to play out. They all turn towards it and see–

The echo of a young woman entering the mansion behind them. She bears a distraught expression and has her hand pressed down firmly over her heart, as if trying to steady it in her chest.

The vestige looks so young and scared, trembling beneath the weight of the darkness surrounding them. She can't have been much older than Yuri or Miu when the memory was imprinted in time. She seems to be searching for something, hoping to find it lost somewhere in the shadows.

Miu's eyes soften. They begin to water as she watches the memory, a small bittersweet smile tugging at her lips.

"Hi, Mom."

Miku's echo swallows, resolving herself. She pulls out a flashlight and steps forward, pushing further in–

Her shadow dissipates back into thin air. The echo comes to an end.

Yuri and Hisoka share yet another silent look.

Oh.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Stay tuned!

In other news, I have finally played Mask of the Lunar Eclipse! It was so good! Sad per the Fatal Frame MO but unreasonably good! The ghost designs were legitimately scary! I wish they had kept that style of gameplay for MOBW. Well, everything except the "running" speed. I call Ruka, Misaki, and Madoka my little penguins. They do not move fast. Like seriously, Yuri could have saved everyone on Mt. Hikami, ran to Rougetsu, rescued all three girls, put Sakuya's soul to rest, and cured Moonlight Syndrome all before any of them crossed the dining room in Rougetsu Hall. The girls are adorable and I love them, but they are so slow. Choshiro is cool too. I love that he and Sayaka were Ruka's ghost guardians. I wish they'd do that more with other good ghosts. He's a good guy and a way better father figure to Ruka than her own ever was. I'd like to punt Soya and all of the Haibaras (excluding Sakuya) to the moon they so revere.

But also, was nobody going to warn me about Madoka?! No, not about the fact that she dies. My tender heart is, of course, really sad about it, but I already knew. I'm talking about her freaking ghost model! Holy hell! I was expecting her to have gotten the Fuyuhi/Haruka treatment-- like yeah, they're clearly dead now, but the model is still mostly the same as the cutscene prior to their fight. NOPE. She got the Silent Hill 4 victim 21 treatment! She came out of that cutscene lunging at Mach speed, and it legitimately startled the hell out of me. Had to pause to recollect myself. Again, legitimately scary ghost designs.

Anyway, all that to say expect our MotLE girls to show up in this series sometime soon. See you in the next chapter!

Chapter 2: Strangling Ritual pt.1

Chapter Notes

Alrighty, here we go!

It really helps to know about the gift Ren got Yuri in *birds of a feather (we should stick together)* for this story! As it turns out, it's a very useful present, after all! Yuri just might need a little time to warm up to it...

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Singling out Miku's echo among the masses is more challenging than expected.

It's mixed in with decades– possibly *centuries*– of other memories and emotions, all demanding to reveal themselves now that someone is around who is capable of listening. Yuri tries to sift through them, to reach beneath the crushing waves, but she's struggling against the tide as it tries to drag her under. The echoes feel different here. They're almost distorted somehow, overlapping and intertwined.

She's going to have a massive migraine after all of this is said and done. She can tell already.

"Miu." Hisoka tilts her head at the younger girl before glancing briefly at Yuri. She must sense that she's already growing overwhelmed. "Do you have a token?"

Miu perks up and nods, determination shining in her eyes.

Reaching back, she pulls the pin from her hair, letting it spill down her shoulders as she retrieves the familiar hair ornament. She's very careful with it, determined to keep it safe, but holds it up to indicate her intentions. "I also found a bunch of research about this place. I brought it all just in case. Hopefully it helps..."

She starts to rummage through the satchel slung over her shoulder and eventually produces a heavy stack of timeworn paperwork. It all appears to be covered in vaguely recognizable handwriting, scrawled in the margins with lightly smudged ink.

Mio's eyes flash, lighting up with recognition. She almost looks amused as she watches Miu flip through it. "Where did you find all that?"

"In the attic above my room at my mothers' house." Miu doesn't lift her gaze from the research. She misses the look on Mio's face, the small, knowing grin. "Mama must have compiled it when she was searching for my mom. Why?"

Mio shrugs, casually turning her gaze away. "No reason."

Miu hums, narrowing her eyes. She's clearly unconvinced but doesn't push the matter.

When she finally finds what she's looking for– a crinkled, old newspaper clipping– she turns her gaze back up to them. "We can use my hairclip and this newspaper to help sift through the echoes. According to it, a famous author and his team went missing right around the same time my mom was here. This article has each of their photos. We might be able to use them as tokens too. They're a bit faint, but if we can find their trace, we should be able to use them to find hers here as well."

"Takamine Junsei," Mio nods, her eyes washing over the clipping in Miu's hand. Miu offers her a closer look. She accepts the article from her, holding it closer to the meager sunlight streaming in from outside. "He came here with his editor and assistant, searching for inspiration for his next novel. None of them were ever seen or heard from again."

Yuri, Hisoka, and Miu all grimace. An all too common tale.

"You're familiar with the story? Did you know them?" Hisoka is watching Mio curiously as if wondering how she knew.

Mio looks up at her from the clipping and shakes her head. "I didn't, but my uncle did. He worked under Takamine for a while..." She hesitates for a brief moment before adding slowly, "Alongside Yuu, Rei's late fiance." Her gaze jumps back to Miu. "And your uncle. Miku's brother, Mafuyu."

An awkward silence settles over them. It's a lot to unpack. Especially for Yuri, who feels a bit out of the loop– she's the only one without any connection to anyone involved here, distant or otherwise.

She knew Miku had a brother. He passed away a long time ago.

Miku faced a violent curse and terrible darkness trying to save him. When she couldn't, she was drawn into a second curse a mere two years later– some sort of nightmare realm between death and sleep that tormented her with her own guilt and grief, forcing her to chase after a false image of his spirit. When her soul fractured in the rift, her brother warned her of what had happened and of what was to come. He stayed beside her as often as he could in the black water of the casket at the House of Joining, comforting her when she was caught in a cycle of life and death, perpetually drowning beneath the waves.

Yuri also knew Rei was caught in a terrible car accident once, one that stole away someone very important from her.

They had discussed it late one night when everyone else had been asleep. Yuri knew her pain all too well. They had both lost everything in a matter of seconds. While Miku was chasing her brother, Rei was chasing the person she lost: her former fiancé. The ink curse of the Manor of Sleep nearly took her too.

It's strange. They all seem so connected– the Hinasakis, the Kurosawas, the Amakuras. Their pasts, their experiences, their bloodlines, their sixth sense...

And Yuri is still somehow just an outsider.

"Huh. Weird." Miu finally mutters, perturbed by the revelation. "That's probably why my uncle was here then. Which, in turn, is why my mom came here too..." She shakes her head and starts to dig through her papers again. "I've got another clipping that says they both went missing. Only my mom was rescued..."

Mio swallows, shifting uncomfortably. That heavy sadness overcomes her again– all three girls can sense it. She's still trying to bury it. Turning her gaze down, she nods stiffly.

Miu stiffens as well, ceasing her search and subtly glancing at Mio worriedly.

It keeps happening.

What does Miu know?

"Well..." Hisoka starts, trying to diffuse the tension. She's fighting not to fidget at the awkward air settling over them again. "Shall we?"

They all nod, shaking off the melancholy and taking another look around. The foyer of the mansion only appears to have two doors: the front entrance they came through and another leading deeper in to the west. The wall to the east bears an old mask hanging crookedly on some sort of hook; the weathered carving looks furious, like a demon staring them down. A faded Sanskrit symbol is hidden behind it, just barely peeking out.

Receiving the newspaper back from Mio, Miu tucks it back into her bag and pulls out the spirit flashlight. She hands it off to Hisoka, a silent request to light their way before setting her focus on her mother's hairclip. Furrowing her brow in concentration, she finally looks to the west. "This way."

The hallway beyond the entrance is also in ruins, cluttered with rubble strewn across the floorboards. Hanging ropes dangle ominously from the rafters, just barely swinging as if something had recently passed through and disturbed them; hopefully just a benign draft. At the very end of the hallway is a large, dusty mirror– the glass is just barely visible, shining in the flashlight's beam through layers of dirt. The walls are covered with faded handprints, smudged and dragged along the wood– so many, too many to count. It looks like they were painted in blood.

It's all very unnerving, to say the least.

The hallway seems somewhat familiar. Yuri's never seen it before, she's certain of it, but she's seen something *like* it. Despite her best efforts, she can't remember where. Perhaps it was something she saw in a glanced memory or even in a dream.

Or, more likely, a nightmare...

As they proceed down the hall, approaching the mirror, another echo from the past takes hold, hijacking their senses.

The world goes grey. They all fall still and watch as–

Miku appears before them once again, her hand still pressed down over her heart.

She moves cautiously, one careful step forward at a time. Something lies abandoned at the base of the mirror. Miku is clearly drawn to it.

When she arrives before it, she crouches down to retrieve it. In the reflection, Yuri can see that it's a camera. A Camara Obscura. A very strange one. It's very different from any of the ones she's ever seen before– certainly unique from Hisoka's or Rei's or Ren's.

But Miku definitely recognizes it.

There's a devastation shining in her vestige's eyes, tinted with deeply unsettled fear. This must be the Hinasaki Camera Obscura. The one that was destroyed and lost long ago.

Suddenly Miku tenses. She gets a look on her face as if she's sensing something, something in the shadows, something they can't yet see. She turns her gaze up to the mirror and then quickly whips around to face them, and–

The echo ends, washing the world in color once more.

They all turn to Miu.

Miu looks pensive, lost in thought. There's a pain in her eyes that matches with her mother's echo.

After a moment, she pulls herself back to the surface. She clears her throat and confirms Yuri's suspicions. "That was my great grandmother's Camera Obscura. It was...'passed down' through the generations, inherited after deaths in the family. I think my uncle must have brought it with him when he came here. I found a file that says it was supposedly the most complete of Dr. Asou's prototypes, though I can't see how. It looked way older than the others..." Then, she grumbles in annoyance under her breath, masking a pain that she doesn't want to talk about, "Not to mention it had a track record of killing its owners..."

They all look at her sympathetically but don't ask her to elaborate. They don't know all of the fine details, but they know many people in her family died or went missing under tragic or mysterious circumstances. It doesn't take much to come to the conclusion that the supernatural was involved– Miu and Miku's sixth sense is the hallmark of the Hinasaki bloodline, after all.

Politely brushing their commiserations off, Miu pauses, locating her mother's trace. When she finds it again, she slowly leads them towards it as she continues, "Asou supposedly went missing here too. Ren isn't convinced, but that's what the old documents seem to imply. It's all pretty vague."

Hisoka hums thoughtfully as they follow her. She's still shivering, unnerved by the oppressive air of the mansion, but continues to keep a vigilant watch, warding off the shadows with the flashlight. "That man's name always seems to show up wherever the darkness from the Netherworld is particularly dense. It must have been bad here if it's where he finally met his end."

"Or maybe his luck just finally ran out," Mio mutters darkly to the younger three girls' surprise. Her disdain on the matter catches them off guard. She shrugs at their perplexed expressions. "Didn't you say he was the reason for the downfall of Mt. Hikami too? Your 'Immortal Flower,' right? She suffered for a long time because of him..."

"Maybe unintentionally," Yuri fidgets uncomfortably, feeling uncertain. "He definitely didn't help, but he also didn't necessarily mean for any of it to happen. He didn't reveal his feelings for Ose to her on purpose."

Her frown deepens as she considers, thinking back to the memories she had glanced from her kindred spirit. Ose's heart had already been at its bursting point when she entered the reliquary. It overflowed when her fellow maidens, her friends, were senselessly slaughtered all across the mountain around her. Sure, she was bearing the burden of his feelings for her and a painful longing in her heart for warmth and acceptance, but that much anguish would have caused anyone to break either way. Ose was incredibly strong for holding on as long as she did.

Yuri shakes her head before voicing her musings, "Honestly, I think the burden she was forced to bear was too much for her regardless. And if it wasn't his feelings for her that pushed her to break, then it might have eventually been Tsuki's instead–"

As they step into the next room, she abruptly cuts off. She senses a shift– a diversion of attention, a spark of interest coursing into her through her hand. Out of the corner of her eye, she catches Hisoka perking up at something. Following her gaze over a musty sunken fireplace, she finds it's fixed on a familiar silhouette.

In the far corner of the room at the foot of a staircase stands a cobweb-coated grandfather clock. It must have been a very striking piece at some point. Time, however, has left it shattered, swollen with moisture and caked with so many layers of muddied dust that the face is practically illegible.

Yuri pulls Hisoka closer, tugging her back against her. She gives her a knowing smile before muttering to her under her breath.

"No potentially haunted objects in the house."

It's Hisoka's rule– instated after that fateful week on the mountain. Yuri is just reiterating and reinforcing it. They didn't bring any cleansing candles, and they can never be too careful...

Hisoka gives her a look of surprise, blue eyes blinking at her oh-so-innocently. "I wasn't," she whispers back earnestly. Then, when Yuri's smile widens and her eyes narrow as if to say *oh, really?*, she grows sheepish and amends, "Okay... maybe I considered it... just for a moment. But..." She glances back at the old clock. Another shiver passes through her. She presses

herself even closer to Yuri, tucking herself firmly against her side. "I sense something from it. Something... dark. Maybe it's best if we keep our distance."

Yuri nods, tittering affectionately and squeezing her hand in gentle reassurance. Miu and Mio both snort, rolling their eyes at the two and their mushy antics.

"I'm just saying Asou had a habit of leaving behind ruin in his wake." Mio redirects them back to their previous conversation. Her arms are folded in front of her as she examines the decaying antiques and books on the shelves from a safe distance away. "We did a lot of research on him, his inventions, and the places he'd been when we were looking for your mom. He... 'unintentionally'... caused a lot of heartache." Her gaze shifts back towards Miu. She changes the subject. "Where does the trace lead next?"

Miu falls still, bringing her focus back to the task at hand. She clasps her fingers around the hair ornament again and then scrunches her forehead. "It's...all over the place. I think she went upstairs but then came back down, and–"

All of the hairs on the back of Yuri's neck stand on end. Miu jolts as well, stumbling back and reaching for Mio's hand–

An echo of a man appears in front of them. He's wandering, making his way towards a suspicious partition leaning against the north wall, nearly tucked beneath the stairs.

He reaches the partition and then walks right through it, phasing through the solid screen.

"Mr. Takamine! Tomoe! Where have you both gone?"

Yuri expects the echo to end, but the grey persists. Her body remains tense. She fights down the urge to push Hisoka behind her, to place herself in front of her protectively. Instead, she tugs on her hand, pulling her closer to Miu and Mio. Hisoka moves with her, pointing the spirit flashlight to illuminate the echo as they witness it together.

After a seemingly infinite moment, Miku's echo appears once more, approaching the partition as well. As she stares at it, the soft sound of a bell startles her. She turns towards it and stutters out an unsettled breath, picking out something in the darkness.

They follow her gaze and find a young girl in a white kimono staring back at them.

As soon as they spot her, the girl suddenly steps forward, moving quickly towards Miku. Miku lets out an alarmed gasp and nearly stumbles backwards.

The girl stops in front of her. She doesn't try to attack. All she does is point, first at the camera in Miku's hand, then at the partition the man disappeared through. Miku's gaze follows where she indicates, looking on in confusion.

When she looks back, her gaze seeking the little girl, the little girl is nowhere to be seen. She's gone, vanished into thin air, and–

Color floods back into the world. They let out a collective breath.

"Okay..." Miu mumbles, staring at the wall the partition in the echo once covered; there's a rather conspicuous door in its place. The partition itself has been shoved aside to reveal it. She tries to cross her arms in front of her but remembers she's still holding Mio's hand at the last moment. She fidgets with the hairpin in her other hand instead. "So she obviously went that way."

"That little girl..." Hisoka starts, her pensive look returning. "She knew what the spirit camera could be used for. She showed Miku how to take a phantom exposé. But who was she? And that man..."

"Wait, I think I recognize him." Mio reaches out to Miu, motioning towards her bag. Miu pulls the old newspaper clipping back out and hands it back to her. They all gather closely around her to see what she's going to reveal. "There. Ogata Koji. He was Takamine's editor."

Miu grimaces. "My mom must have been following his shadow, hoping it would lead her to her brother."

"Sounds about right." Mio hands the papers back again. "Can you still feel her echo?"

Miu nods, tucking the research back in her bag. Returning her attention to the hair ornament, she leads them forward through the conspicuous door.

The hallway beyond is shaped like an L and filled with dangling lanterns, still barely attached to long ropes, frayed and nearly rotted through. Rounding the corner, they find themselves faced with a split path: there's a door on the left, an offshoot further down on the right, and an open and empty closet right at the very end.

Miu pauses, still sifting through the echoes. She steps towards the door on the left. "Over here..."

She reaches out to open the door. Yuri gets another cold shock of unease up her spine. Her vision flickers back to greyscale.

Miu and Miku's echo suddenly begin to overlap–

The Hinasakis open the door together, and then both stumble back with a gasp. Mr. Ogata's twisted spectre looms over them, standing menacingly in the threshold with a furious snarl and cold, dead eyes.

Yuri jolts forward to grab Miu.

Mio beats her to it.

She pulls her against her, dragging her back protectively closer to Yuri and Hisoka, and–

The echo fades once again. They all remain frozen for a moment, disoriented and panting from the sudden jump scare.

Miu finally lets out a tense sigh. "I guess he's not friendly anymore."

"The curse here must have corrupted his spirit," Hisoka mumbles. She's glancing at Yuri worriedly again, still sensing how deeply the echoes are affecting her. "His shadow is so heavy..."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Mio mutters as she gently releases Miu. "Curses like these tend to eat away even the gentlest of souls."

They all frown, intimately familiar with the notion. Miu and Mio step forward through the door first. Hisoka starts to follow but stops when she notices Yuri isn't moving with her.

Yuri's shaking is getting worse.

Something happened in the next room. Something terrible. Something gruesome. She can already sense it.

Swallowing her apprehension, she pushes forward anyway. Seeing Hisoka's concerned look– feeling her worried eyes washing over her– is enough to set her back into motion. She's fine. She's faced worse.

She can handle this.

Following cautiously behind the other two, she stays on guard, clutching Hisoka's hand like a lifeline. The room they've stepped into is separated by a decaying partition. Miu and Mio are already on the other side; they can see them through the extensive holes torn in the wall. The shadows grow denser with each step they take, dancing in the fickle and weak sunlight fighting a losing battle to illuminate the room through opaque windows.

As they join them on the other side, her apprehension and instincts prove correct once again.

Her vision flashes back to grey. She tries to push it back.

Her efforts are in vain.

She's dragged in, into another echo of the past, and–

"That woman! That woman in a kimono is coming!"

Gaze snapping towards the sound, Yuri looks over to catch Mr. Ogata's vestige as it ducks behind a smaller partition further in. He appears to be making his way towards another closet, tucked away in the very back corner of the room.

The fear resonating off of his echo is overwhelming, setting her heart pounding almost violently in her chest.

"It feels like she went this way... Yuri? Yuri, what's wrong?"

Miu's voice cuts into the echo, but it's nearly drowned out by a demonic warbling coming from inside the closet. It sounds like a tape recorder, but the tape speed has been slowed to a crawl. It's growling out a low, garbled transcript, words that sound like words but aren't, a vague and crude mockery of intelligent language.

All of the hairs on the back of Yuri's neck stand on end again.

Whipping around, she finds herself face to face with an eerie woman in a white kimono. Her long dark hair covers her eyes, and pure malice clings to her frame, taking form behind her as a writhing, twisting mass of fused and corrupted souls. Five frayed ropes hang from her body, around her neck and each of her limbs, dragging along the tatami as she stalks towards the closet.

Her feet are not touching the ground.

"Yuri," Miu tries again. Her voice is closer this time, desperate as if she's trying to reach out, trying to help. Yuri can't reach back right now. She can't turn away. "Yuri, it's okay... Hisoka, what is she seeing?"

"I–" Hisoka starts, but her throat is locked up too. With their hands intertwined, she can still see everything Yuri sees. They're witnessing the woman's slow, sinister approach together.

Mr. Ogata is in the closet. The spirit is hunting him.

Yuri's breathing escalates to near hyperventilation. Waves of panic are crashing over her, overcoming her senses as she watches helplessly. She's seen enough death in her lifetime to know what's about to happen.

She can feel Hisoka's fear pouring into her through their hands too, compounding with her own. The sensation reminds her of what's at stake.

She's dragging Hisoka down with her.

She doesn't want Hisoka to see. She doesn't want it to hurt her. Hisoka's warmth, her light– she needs to protect her light–

The screaming starts. Yuri jolts, yanking her hand away. Her vision remains grey, but she looks away, squeezing her eyes closed just in time. The sound of limbs ripping and tearing, the choking, the gurgling, the sharp stench of blood...

It's too much–

The echo finally ends.

Yuri’s knees nearly give out from beneath her.

She feels sick. Her head hurts. Her body is sore from involuntarily tensing. She fights the urge to cover her ears.

She's not sick anymore, she's not sick anymore, she's not...

Cool hands land on either side of her face. In the past, she would have jumped and jerked away. In the present, she remains still and lets them hold her.

She knows who they belong to.

Tears of relief burn behind her eyelids at the sensation of Hisoka's warmth caressing her skin. She lets out a quiet whimper. Taking deep breaths to steady her breathing, she slowly relaxes into Hisoka's touch.

She's not sick anymore.

She's not alone anymore.

When she finally opens her eyes, she's met with teary blue watching her, so deeply distraught. Hisoka looks so upset as she strokes over her face, leaning their heads together to help ground her. Yuri can tell she's hurt that she wouldn't let her share the burden of the echo. She knows they're supposed to be partners, that they are a team and in this together, but she can't bring herself to regret protecting her from it.

Hisoka is so sensitive. So kind. She carries heavy things in her heart for a long time. She still has nightmares about Akari. About Yuri in Akari's place. About red blood in white sand. Her sixth sense may have become significantly stronger after her time in the black water, but Yuri still doesn't want to hurt her. She needs to protect her. She needs to protect her light.

No matter the cost.

When she can breathe and the waves crashing over her head relent, she finds Miu and Mio watching over them too. Miu has tears in the corners of her eyes. Her face is scrunched slightly as if she's fighting them. Mio's expression is full of sorrow and just as concerned.

"He, uh...Mr. Ogata..." Yuri finally finds her voice. It wavers and cracks as she fumbles her words. "He was attacked here."

Miu's eyes narrow. She glances back in the general direction of the closet. "Where? Over there?"

Yuri can tell she's searching for the echo, sifting through the shadows to find what she had just witnessed. "Miu, don't," she quickly implores. Her voice breaks again. "Please. Please don't."

Miu hesitates, naturally inclined to argue. At the pleading look on Yuri's face though, her shoulders slowly begin to fall until reluctantly, she gives in. She leaves the echo to lie.

"What attacked him?" Mio finally speaks up, squeezing Miu's hand comfortingly, sensing her internal conflict. "A spirit?"

"It was… a woman in a white kimono," Yuri starts, trying to stifle and steady her body's trembling. She can still feel the violence of the spirit's presence like a chill burrowing deep beneath her skin. It was just a memory, an echo of the past, but it had felt so intense, so real.

At the revelation, Mio subtly flinches.

Yuri catches it. She continues uneasily, her frown deepening, "She had ropes tied to all of her limbs and wrapped around her neck like a noose. The darkness coming off of her... It was really powerful."

“I see…” Mio mumbles somberly. She contemplates for a moment before carefully asking, "And um... how did Mr. Ogata die?"

Yuri swallows roughly, averting her gaze. "He was... torn apart."

They all grimace. Hisoka pulls Yuri into her arms to hold her.

Mio sighs, her expression still sad and sympathetic. "That woman was probably the source of the curse. Whatever happened to her must have set everything else here into motion."

"Just like Ose..." Yuri mutters under her breath. Only Hisoka hears it. She runs her hand through auburn hair, stroking through it soothingly.

"This place was called the House of Mutilation for a long time." Miu shifts unhappily, still staring at the closet door. She narrows her eyes into a glare, as if silently sending her disdain its way for harming someone she cares about. "They used to find corpses with their heads and limbs missing in the forest around here. The articles I found said a ritual had to be performed once every ten years using 'laceration ropes' to 'close the gates and stay the priestess's power'..."

"She must have been the priestess then." Yuri rubs at her eye, scrubbing away tears as the nauseating sensations of the echo finally start to subside.

In their place, something sour and angry is slowly taking form.

She's so sick of seeing people tortured and slaughtered for other people's gain.

They're told over and over again by corrupted spirits and tattered memos scrawled on old parchment that these sacrifices were necessary for safety and prosperity. But were they really? She's starting to agree with Miu and Ren. These tears in the planes of reality didn't just appear. They didn't form unprovoked out of nowhere. Gates and shrines must be built. Spirits and darkness can't build physical structures in the realm of the living. People– *living people*– had to be there first, preceding the tears however many eons ago they were rent.

The other girls remain silent as she steadies herself, watching over her worriedly. When she finally feels strong enough to carry on, she looks over at Miu and motions towards the next doorway. "Through there?"

"I..." Miu looks back over her shoulder at it too. She's hesitating, glancing down at the hair ornament. She's clearly still worried. It's making her reluctant to push on so soon– much to Yuri's mild annoyance. Despite this, she tentatively nods and turns to proceed. "Yeah. She went this way."

"Wait." Hisoka shakes her head, taking Yuri's hand again. Yuri can feel that she's still upset, but now, she can also sense a determination flaring– her stubbornness by another name. "Give us just a moment, please."

Hisoka starts to pull her back out of the room, trying to find them some privacy.

Mio and Miu immediately start to protest.

"Woah, wait–!" Miu takes a step back towards them, nearly dragging Mio with her.

"Stay close," Mio insists, looking at Hisoka almost sternly. "I don't want any of you getting hurt on my watch. We need to stay together."

Hisoka ducks her head, feeling a bit scolded, but nods, understanding her concerns. She pulls Yuri back to the entrance of the room instead, as far away as she possibly can.

Dropping her voice really low, she whispers softly, just to Yuri, "Okay, please don't get upset..."

Yuri gives her a wary look, uncertain and suddenly set back on edge. She watches Hisoka pull something from her pocket and then stiffens when she realizes what it is. "I thought you were skeptical of that..."

"I was," Hisoka admits. She starts to ramble, trying to justify the object's presence in her possession, "but then I talked with Ren, and he showed me his research, and I just think that maybe, just for now, while we're here..."

"Hisoka," Yuri mutters through grit teeth, fighting down her frustration. She knows Hisoka doesn't mean it... "I'm fine. I don't need it–"

"Please?" Hisoka pleads with a forlorn whisper. Tears are forming in the corners of her eyes again as she steps closer, trying to catch Yuri's gaze when she looks away. Her hand lands on Yuri's stomach as she reaches for her, the touch unwittingly allowing Yuri to feel her distress all over again. "Yuri, please? For me? The echoes... They're too deep here. They're hurting you..."

Yuri makes a frustrated sound but knows she can't actually bring herself to say no. Not when Hisoka is already so upset and worried. Her scowl remains, but she begrudgingly extends her arm, allowing Hisoka to wind the cord around her wrist.

The moment the amulet and obsidian touch her skin, the echoes around her fade to distant whispers.

It's ironic, she thinks. When Ren had gifted the curious bracelet to her, she had been the one who was open to trying it. Hisoka, on the other hand, had been hesitant, wary of any potentially unforeseen outcomes or dire consequences wearing such an artifact might have– more out of protectiveness than anything else.

Now, looking down at it, Yuri lets out a heavy sigh.

A familiar feeling is building in her chest. One she hasn't felt in a long time. Her old mantra is mummering on loop in the back of her mind like an old record, scratched and warped out of shape.

But she's not sick. She knows she's not sick. Hisoka doesn't think she's sick. Neither does Miu. Or Mio or Miku or Rei...

Her family and friends know she's not sick.

They're just trying to take care of her, just like they always do. They're trying to ease her burden, her sensitivity and pain in the face of the slowly fading remnants of abyssal darkness. This bracelet is nothing like the medication she was once forced to take. It's not there to try and "fix" her. She can still feel and use her sixth sense, still reach out for the echoes and shadows if she wants to. She can still sense them. They're quieter now but all still there.

She glares down at her wrist, regardless.

She's not sick anymore.

But it sort of feels like this bracelet is proof of otherwise.

It feels like a restraint. It feels like a muzzle. It feels like they don't trust her with her own abilities, even though she's worked so hard to coexist with them– to embrace them even.

Fighting back tears, she lets her arm fall heavily back to her side, shifting her gaze down to the rotted floorboards beneath her feet instead. Maybe the darkness really is getting to her.

Or maybe she's just hurt.

When they return back around the corner to join Miu and Mio, Mio cocks her head to the side, eyeing Yuri's new accessory curiously. Mindful of the tension between the girls, the heaviness in their demeanor, she smiles gently as she nudges Miu. "Huh. That sort of looks like the bracelets you made for my uncle and me."

Miu's expression is sad and her voice is subdued as she takes in the frustration and despair rolling off of Yuri. Her answer is somber through the tightness in her throat. "It's...Mt. Hikami obsidian. It acts sort of like a protective ward, kind of like our stone mirror shards. Her bracelet is special though. That amulet attached to it was supposedly used to help new shrine maidens when they were first learning to hone their sixth sense. Ren did all the research and found it for her."

"The Maidens of Black Water called obsidian the 'blood of the mountain.'" Hisoka still has stressed tears in her eyes. She's rubbing anxiously at her shoulder, avoiding everyone's gaze, still upset and now filled with remorse– though not regret. She'd do anything to keep Yuri safe. "Combined with the amulet, it acts as a filter of sorts, warding off untethered echoes and energies. It allowed the new maidens to focus solely on the objects or people they intended to glance into, keeping them from being perpetually overwhelmed by other influences around them."

Mio lets out a soft hum, sympathetic and understanding. There's a knowing glint in her eyes, as if the concept of mysterious stones and their supernatural properties is already intimately familiar to her. "Does it work?"

Yuri grunts and then shrugs half-heartedly, folding her arms tightly across herself. "Yeah. I guess. Everything becomes...muted. Quieter. Like my head is underwater." Hisoka and Miu both give her a heartbroken look. She ignores it. "I can still make things out, feel things, but I really have to concentrate."

“Is that…” Mio furrows her brow, somewhat surprised and a little confused by her frustration. It's genuinely unusual to see her so incensed– and with Hisoka and Miu of all people, her two favorites in the whole world. "...not a good thing? After everything you've felt and seen, especially from places like this, you'd think it would be a relief to be able to take a step back from it all."

Yuri finally lifts her gaze from the floorboards, just enough to side-eye all of them.

"I'm not that broken girl anymore."

They all stare at her sadly. Miu's hand unconsciously finds her heart, a habit she shares with her mother that surfaces when they're distressed. The tears in Hisoka's eyes renew. Mio's frown deepens.

"Yuri..."

"Let's just..." Yuri shrugs them all off again. Still, she gently reaches out to take Hisoka's hand, vigilantly scanning the room, looking everywhere except them. Everything is uncomfortably quiet. She's not used to the silence anymore. "Come on. Let's just find the next echo."

The others reluctantly concede. They all carry on heavily through the next door.

The following room is filled with faded kimonos stretched across racks, creating a barrier between them and the main space beyond. Yuri can still sense the echoes swirling about in the shadows, but they're effervescent and fleeting, like faint wisps of mist slipping past her senses.

The echoes have never been like this before. They've always been overwhelming, crashing over her like turbulent ocean waves.

She learned to adapt, always bracing herself for the next impact. She learned to swim, to break away and propel herself back to the surface when she'd get towed under. She learned to orient herself, to mitigate, so that she never fully drowns beneath the tide as it overtakes her. She's been getting better at it. It's been getting easier. Especially since her final confrontation with Ose at the Shadowspring.

Now, with the bracelet, it feels like she's struggling to catch drops of rain in a heavy storm.

They're right in front of her. She can feel them and see them if she reaches out and really tries, but she can never quite grasp the whole picture as it all comes down around her. She's going to have to take it in one purposeful drop at a time.

There is one silver lining to having her powers restrained, though, she supposes.

She can feel Hisoka *so* clearly right now.

The threat of looming shadows and stray energies– either violently demanding her attention or slowly creeping up to overwhelm her– no longer hangs over her. It's almost as if the low

drone of electricity or the steady whir of a fan, feelings and sounds that she's long grown accustomed to, have suddenly all been silenced.

Right now, as she holds her hand, her senses are filled almost entirely with just Hisoka.

There's a small part of her that still wants to be frustrated. But there's another part, a growing part, that's *basking* in the sensation.

A realization is dawning on her, brightening her mind like soft morning sunshine. With her focus set solely on Hisoka, she can better watch out for her. She can take care of her, keeping an eye on her anxiety and exhaustion, her worries and uncertainty, both about her and about what the rest of this misadventure has in store. She can soothe her distress, chase away her fears, know what she needs before she can even voice it. She just needs to be careful not to push in too far. She doesn't want to be intrusive or break Hisoka's trust. Just the grazing along the surface will suffice.

Maybe Mio was right to some extent. She supposes she does feel a little relieved.

But even more so, she feels *determined*.

She can do this. She can keep Hisoka safe.

Leading the way, Miu steps past the kimonos and into the center of the room, holding Mio's hand and looking around with a confused look on her face. She seems to be struggling to follow the trace– which is odd. She usually does it so effortlessly. Her status as a shadowborn, the product of both a Hinasaki and a Kurosawa, makes the process come almost completely natural to her.

They watch over her, quietly letting her work, before, finally, Hisoka asks what they're all wondering.

"Miu... What's the matter?"

Miu contemplates for a moment, her forehead remaining scrunched. She's standing by a set of windows at the far end of the room when she turns back to them. "I don't know. I think my mom might have come back here a few times. Maybe? It's strange, it's like she–"

She's cut off by a deep, rumbling voice growling out a sharp "*hey!*" It comes from somewhere back where they entered. They all turn towards it, startling at the sound.

Breathing heavily with nerves, Hisoka pulls Yuri back towards her as she's honing her focus on where the sound originated. Beside them, Yuri can tell Miu is doing the same, tuning in to help locate the source.

Feeling Hisoka's focus sharpening through her hand, the spark of her sixth sense guiding her own, Yuri finds herself able to pinpoint the echo they're searching for faster than ever before; it's hanging heavily in the air, just around the corner of the last kimono racks. Shielded by the bracelet's influence, she brushes all of the other shadows aside, drawing forth only one echo.

Just as before, their vision goes grey, and then they see–

Miku is under attack.

The ghost of the editor, now violent and vengeful, appears before her as she's making her way back towards the abrupt sound of his voice. He looms over her, glaring down, and then viciously lunges forward.

Miku flashes his photo just in time.

Warding him off, she battles with the Camera Obscura until he eventually retreats– for now.

When she's certain that he's gone, she turns towards the old chests in the corner of the room, drawn in by the unusual aura radiating off of them. She hesitates and then raises the camera again, snapping a psychic photo of the suspicious indent on the top of one.

Amidst the flash, the echo changes.

Miku appears to be returning with some sort of antique hand mirror, intricately carved and brightly polished despite its age. She places it in the indent. The drawer beneath it unlocks. She receives two items for her trouble: a key and a photo. The key looks to be old, made of heavy, tarnished brass, and the photo looks to be of...

Mr. Ogata?

As she examines it, ropes appear, burned into the pigment around his limbs and neck.

The photo reveals the curse that sealed his fate.

"Mom..."

Yuri hears Miu's voice through the echo again, somewhat distant but crystal clear. She sounds worried, as if she's trying to warn Miku of something.

She turns and finds out why.

Behind Miku, the editor's ghost has rematerialized. Miku stills as if she can sense him too. He reaches out to grasp her again, and again, she turns just in time. Using the camera, she fights him off once more.

This time when she takes the final exorcising shot, his soul shrinks down into a bright, fiery wisp. The wisp is drawn in, pulled towards the camera in Miku's hands before disappearing inside the lens. It almost appears to be absorbed by it, sealing the editor's ghost away inside, and then–

They all come out of the echo a little unsteady, holding onto each other for support.

"Okay..." Mio finally starts, blinking in the low lighting of the heavily filtered sun and the flashlight. She looks over at Miu, who looks lost in thought again. Miu notices her checking in and brings herself back to the surface, giving a quick nod to confirm that she's alright. Mio gives her an encouraging smile in return. "So that got her a key. Now where?"

Wiping the sweat from her temple, Miu sighs before bringing her focus back to her hair ornament once again. After a moment, she hums pensively and then starts moving. "This way."

Making their way through the dilapidated corridors, they backtrack almost the entire way they came. Miu's brow is still furrowed in concentration but also in deep perturbation. Yuri pokes her gently, repeating their sentiment from earlier in a silent question.

What is it?

Focus momentarily broken, Miu swats at Yuri with a huff but finally answers. "It's like the echoes...are echoing." She groans, rolling her eyes in annoyance at the lackluster explanation. She tries again. "It's like they're stacked on top of each other or mixed together somehow. Like, they somehow took place at the same but different times. They're not like the ones I'm used to. They're harder to make sense of."

She shakes her head in frustration as she pushes forward, returning her focus to following her mother's trace. Keeping up, Hisoka and Mio remain silent, contemplating why that might be. Yuri remains silent as well, but there's also a creeping sense of dread growing inside of her.

Something about this brings Miku's words from a long time ago back to the forefront of her mind. She remembers catching them through the chaos right before she went back to the Shadowspring for the final time, right after she told everyone the truth– the truth about how she knew all that was going to happen that fateful week and how she knew what she had to do to put an end to it.

Back then, Miku had tried to offer her comfort in the form of validation, corroborating her unlikely account of events. Yuri didn't fully understand back then, but it helped, knowing she wasn't alone in facing the impossible things she experienced during a week that never was.

Now, though, the words ringing in her ears are leaving her cold and restless.

"Time alteration isn't exactly unheard of in supernatural situations. I experienced it a long time ago..."

Did... Did a stone mirror break for Miku here? Is that why the echoes are distorted?

No, that doesn't make sense.

Miku told her the things she experienced in the previous version of reality were erased– as if they never existed to begin with. They were overwritten by the true reality, the reality they live in now. Miku was certain of it.

Yuri believes her. Without a sliver of doubt.

A shattered stone mirror didn't do this. It wouldn't have left these strange ripples in the echoes– it would have erased the overlapping echoes altogether.

So was there something else at play here?

Yuri swallows nervously but doesn't mention her anxious musings. She doesn't want to upset Miu or break her focus again. She merely presses in closer to Hisoka, unconsciously seeking her comfort.

Caught up in her own thoughts and worries, she doesn't notice the way Hisoka is watching her, attentively studying her expression, her emotions, her every move.

Hisoka remains quiet about her worries for now too.

Making their way up the stairs in the fireplace room, they cut across the upper floor to arrive in a room with tatami flooring. Miu pauses, watching something Yuri can't see– likely Miku's vestige– as it moves back and forth, traversing and backtracking throughout the space. It gives Yuri time to take a good look around with her physical vision, mostly free from the oversensitivity of her sixth sense.

There's a large wooden partition and a table in the center of the room, both rotted and decaying like the rest of the mansion. An altar with an urn stands in one corner, while an old, rusted brazier lines the wall opposite of it. The room has several doors– at least one leading in each direction. She can just barely sense the echoes of the past hiding behind each.

One of the doors in particular catches her eye: a tattered shoji partition that almost appears to be nailed in place over the doorway. Behind it looks like what could be a small library. Something about it seems off though. Something about the door covering the entrance to the library...

It's not supposed to be there.

She's not sure why she feels this way; it's still not as if she's ever been here before. She has no memories of it and has yet to witness what Miku may have experienced in this room, but she can't shake the feeling that it's somehow out of place.

Her sixth sense is trying to tell her something. She's not sure what yet, but there's definitely something off here.

There's no sense in trying to force the shadows to reveal their secrets though, not when Miku's echoes take priority. She lets the feeling slip to the back of her mind for now. Perhaps she'll get her answer as they follow the trace.

Eventually, Miu starts moving again, muttering in irritation under her breath. She takes them to the left towards the small library but bypasses it to step through the door parallel to it instead.

Stepping through yet another walkway, they pass another large, suspicious mirror before heading down a long set of winding stairs. The corridor awaiting them at the bottom seems to be a large rectangle in shape with a storeroom set directly in the center. Two doors are set into opposite walls on either side, one leading north and one leading south. They make their way towards the one on the north side of the room first.

As they approach the corner, Yuri feels another shiver of unease slip down her spine. Even through the bracelet, she can sense something just around the bend: a dense shadow, misshapen and unnatural.

It's reaching. Reaching for them.

Reaching until its bones contort. Reaching until its skin tears. Reaching until its muscles rip. Reaching until–

"Yuri," Hisoka whispers, nudging her gently. She must sense it too: the evil that's pooled, soaking into the floorboards they're moving towards. The echo is dark and deep, exceedingly dangerous to cast out for and touch. Without Yuri's assistance to hold her steady or overextending her own abilities to cast out for it on her own, the echo is an inscrutable distortion in the shadows, waiting patiently to drag her beneath. "What is it?"

Yuri hesitates and then starts to tune into it, intending to read and reveal it for both of them. Pushing past the bracelet's influence, she begins to cast out, bracing herself to dip into the shadow, to take it in and truly examine it.

A sharp flash of bright crimson, fluttering in the corner of her vision, breaks her focus.

She blinks, subtly returning her attention to her surroundings, trying to locate the source.

Her eyes catch on the walls instead.

There are long gouges dragged across the surfaces all around them. They're somewhat reminiscent of the handprints back in the rope hallway but much deeper and far more violent. The marks are faintly bloody and have completely eviscerated the plaster.

Was it the blood that caught her attention? Or something else, warning her of what revealing the shadow would expose? The blood on the wall is long dried, its pigment washed out, nearly nonexistent. It's really more of a rusted brown in color…

It doesn't matter. Whatever it was, it's enough.

Yuri makes up her mind. Her sharpened focus falls away. She lets the shadow slip through her fingers.

Purposely.

Hisoka isn't going to let go of her hand. She doesn't need to see what left those marks behind, and neither does Yuri.

Sensing the shadow receding further from their grasp, Hisoka scrunches her brow in confusion. She turns to Yuri, jutting out her lower lip in a concerned pout, tilting her head questioningly.

If they were just about anywhere else, Yuri would definitely lean in and kiss her.

Despite present circumstances, there's a small smile tugging at Yuri's lips. Her eyes are filled with mirth as Hisoka stares at her, trying to figure her out.

She's so cute.

Especially when she's annoyed.

She watches Hisoka huff and turn away and realizes she's currently in a very intriguing predicament.

Ordinarily, she'd be overwhelmed by now. She'd be struggling beneath the colossal weight of the shadows left behind, reverberating through the space all around them.

There's no denying that she has come a long way with her powers and managing the sensitivity that accompanies them. That being said, she can also admit that the only things keeping her head above the oppressive darkness are the bracelet and Hisoka. She could handle it on her own if she needed to– she's confident now that she could– but their added influence is protecting her, keeping her safe from the worst of it until she's fully prepared to dive in.

Now the only thing she's overwhelmed by is something she's never had before: *choice.*

To witness and investigate the horrors or to leave them where they lie, conserving her energy for other, more pressing echoes. She is presently free to choose for herself. The impulses are still annoyingly present, keeping the morbid curiosity flowing. But now she can *choose* what to expose herself to, what to protect herself from.

And in making that choice, she's also choosing to protect Hisoka too. Sparing herself to spare her love.

And that? That's a choice she can gladly get behind.

Is she being unfair to her love by making the choice for them? Maybe. Maybe she can find a way to compromise with her. They're still a team, after all.

Hisoka may not fully realize it yet, but she and Ren have given Yuri the greatest gift of all: the power of choice and the power of protection combined. She no longer has only her physical body to use as a shield from harm; now, she can protect Hisoka's heart and mind too.

This bracelet really is growing on her.

Just ahead of them, Miu's steps falter. She shudders, clearly sensing the twisted shadow lurking in the hallway with them too. She glances back worriedly as they pass it by, checking to make sure they're all still together and mostly okay.

Her expression turns deeply bewildered when she's met by Hisoka's sulking and Yuri's sudden fire of purpose and determination.

Pursing her lips, she shakes her head at them but carries on.

Together, they push on, wandering deeper into the mansion.

Chapter End Notes

Our little shadowreader is already getting herself in trouble but not the kind we all expected...

Or maybe it is exactly the kind we all expected lol

For the record, Miku is still very much right about everything with the stone mirrors, in case anyone is worried. Yuri's faith is well placed. There's something else at play here that's skewing the echoes-- something that was the inspiration for the premise of this series, all the way back to *once more (with feeling)!* Proof of a certain supernatural mechanism already existing in the canon universe...

That being said, there's also a morbid reason Miku is as certain about her information as she is.

Something, something, intimately familiar...

More on that later.

Thanks for reading! Stay tuned!

Chapter 3: Strangling Ritual pt.2

Chapter Notes

> The Strangling Ritual is probably my favorite chapter in the first Fatal Frame. There's only a few major threats to contend with, but it's still the scariest chapter in my opinion. That being said, there's a lot of starting and stopping, hurdles, barriers, and backtracking as our girls are still finding out...
>
> Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The room they find themselves in appears to be some sort of burial room.

The space is divided by a large partition and contains two altars: a small one in the southwest corner with various red and white candles lying scattered atop it, and a large one that spans nearly the whole length of the room along the north wall. The large one is lined with offerings, decorations, and votive candles that have long since burnt out.

Hopefully the souls they were meant to comfort found peace.

There's a door tucked away in the northwest corner. They pass it by and instead proceed around to the other side of the partition, following along the large altar to arrive at a separate door in the east. This one has a large rectangular scorch mark burned into the wood, right in the center. They all eye it curiously but don't stop to investigate as they continue through.

Glancing at her out of the corner of her eye, Yuri can tell Hisoka is mulling it over, trying to parse out the strange marking. Hisoka recognizes it somehow; perhaps from her mentor's teaching or perhaps from her own research. It had been radiating a very faint darkness, as if a great evil had once been tethered to it but has long since been vanquished. If they happen to double back, perhaps they can take a closer look to indulge her love's curiosity. It's washing into her through their hands, still firmly tangled and held between them.

For now they focus on keeping up with Miu.

The next area is a breath of fresh air– literally. They find themselves back outside, walking along a large porch.

Being in the open air again is almost a heady relief. The gentle sunlight, shining just around the corner, is warm and soothing, and the light breeze helps clear the dust and stagnancy from their lungs. The space is not without its aura of eeriness; there are still shadows looming in the air around them, but the echoes here seem to have faded a bit faster without a ceiling to keep them constrained.

Once again, Miu seems puzzled in her deep concentration as they start down the veranda. They come to a small branch in the path– either continue onward outside or follow a short offshoot to what appears to be an open threshold leading back inside. The door that used to be attached has fallen off its hinges; Yuri can just barely make it out, lying broken on the floor inside. All that remains now is a gaping aperture, exposing all the mysteries that await them inside to the elements.

Miu stalls, looking between the paths before letting out a grumble of annoyance and squeezing her eyes shut. She must already be getting a migraine; an uncommon happening for her, especially this early in the reading.

Something is seriously wrong with these echoes.

"Miu..." Hisoka starts, watching worriedly as Miu grows increasingly frustrated. "Let's rest for a moment..."

Miu scowls, glancing back at her over her shoulder. Her expression softens when she senses her genuine concern. Still, she shakes her head. Taking a deep, steadying breath, she tries to push on–

Mio gently holds her back.

"How about we just look with our physical senses for a moment then and give that sixth sense of yours a rest?" Mio suggests. She makes the choice for them, coaxing Miu down the offshoot. "She can only have gone two ways. If you don't feel her over here, then we can try the other path."

"That's the problem, though," Miu complains with a grumpy pout. She follows along anyway, allowing herself to be led. "I feel her everywhere."

"Then we'll be able to follow her either way." Mio gives her a crooked grin, her eyes bright with mirth. She leads them to the opening of the threshold and peeks in.

She freezes in front of it. Her face falls and turns a ghostly white.

"Mio?" Miu raises an eyebrow at her odd reaction and then narrows her eyes suspiciously. Stepping closer, she tries to peek inside, trying to catch a glimpse of what suddenly has Mio so spooked. "What's wrong? Are you alright?"

Mio catches her, holding her back once more.

Pulling Miu behind her, she backs them both up a step before forcing another lopsided smile. This time, it's a bit sheepish but clearly deeply uncomfortable. "Uh...changed my mind. Let's stay out here. The open air really is much nicer..."

Having caught a glimpse of what awaits them inside the room, Miu's unease breaks. She giggles fondly, a lighthearted lilt in her voice as she teases, "What's the matter? Not a fan of dolls?"

Yuri stiffens. Her hand tightens around Hisoka's. She understands that sentiment wholly. "It's not the dolls themselves. It's what's sometimes hiding inside them..."

Mio glances over at her, meeting her gaze. There's a glimmer in her eyes again, deeply haunted and sad, shining weakly through her presented calm. Her voice falls to something subdued but sympathetic. "You too, huh?"

Yuri nods, staring back worriedly.

What has Mio seen? What wounded her like this?

Mio sighs wearily. "Well, let's just steer clear of this room then."

Rolling her eyes, Miu chuckles again. She takes Mio's hand and starts to lead them back down the balcony, as she had been before their brief detour. "That's fine. Mom went this way anyway."

The atrium opens up as they continue down the porch, revealing the entirety of a beautiful courtyard. What appears to be a small shrine rests quietly across a path overseen by several tall torii gates. Standing opposite of it is a large cherry blossom tree, swaying serenely in the breeze. It's not currently the blossoming season, but Yuri can imagine it must be breathtaking when the flowers are in bloom, filling the sky above it with brilliant shades of pink. A lone stone monument has been constructed not far from the tree's base. It looks almost like a gravestone, like the ones that line the Forbidden Valley on Mt. Hikami.

Despite the fronted serenity the atrium offers, the shadows are still looming. Yuri can sense them rippling again, tethered in places all around the yard, scattered along the path, and weaving throughout the branches of the tree. She can tell the others can sense them too. There are soft sounds in the distance– the songs of birds, crickets, and frogs– but they're all so far away. It's as if even the wildlife knows better than to linger too close to this tomb. The shadows here are dissipating, but the memories of tragedy and violence remain, potent reminders of dangers once posed.

When they arrive at the very end of the porch, Miu stops again, this time to stare intently at the door waiting there. It's another entry to the mansion, bearing a similar scorch mark to the door they entered the atrium from.

"She came here... and then stopped and... turned back...?" Miu's gaze wanders from the door, back the way they came, before scanning out over the atrium. She blinks and then lets out another frustrated grumble before turning back to eye the scorch mark irritably. "That weird burn again... What are these?"

"I think I know..." Hisoka steps forward to stand beside her, examining the mark more closely.

Yuri tilts her head as she examines it too. It's hard to get a good read on it through the bracelet. Curious, she reaches out to touch it, intent on letting her fingers brush over the soot left behind, to reach back through time to discover its purpose–

Without taking her eyes off the scorch mark, Hisoka leisurely catches her hand. She tangles their fingers together again, keeping it held safely away as she continues, "I think it's the remains of a powerful seal. A barrier talisman must have been placed on the door to keep it from opening. Then, when the seal was broken, the talisman must have burned up and left behind this mark..."

"A barrier talisman?" Miu raises an eyebrow, intrigued. "Is this something your mentor taught you about?"

Hisoka nods uneasily. "Seals like this...they're not easy to produce. The process is complex and meticulous and often demands a steep spiritual cost to enact. From what I remember, the essence of a soul is required to construct them, which means they must be cast at the soul's expense. The soul isn't required to be powerful or vengeful, but eventually, after being bound, held against their will and having their essence siphoned away to hold the ward in place..."

They all grimace. It's no wonder the seals burned up so intensely, scarring the wood permanently. They've all encountered ghosts that have thwarted them on their path forward, sealing doors with a powerful force and keeping them from proceeding– or in some cases, escaping.

But for the spirit in question to be forced into the role unwillingly...

"I guess that means your mom broke these seals with her Camera Obscura then," Mio chimes in, eyeing the scorch mark as well. "The captured spirit can't have been too far from here."

Yuri hums thoughtfully, staring off towards the sturdy wall surrounding the mansion's grounds. There's another door tucked away, nearly hidden behind the smaller shrine. She can sense faint pools of congregated darkness emanating from just beyond it too.

"Miu, look..."

Miu follows her gaze across the atrium. Her eyes land on the door. She immediately picks up on her line of thought.

Still holding Hisoka's and Mio's hands, they both begin to focus on the door, reaching for the shadows. When they sense what they're looking for, a brief echo of the past to point their way, their vision goes grey and they see–

A woman, familiar but unfamiliar, leading Miku towards the back of the atrium.

Her echo is laden with reluctance and apprehension, almost overwhelmingly so, even at a distance. She didn't want to come. She didn't want to be here.

She came anyway. The decision sealed her fate.

When she reaches the door, she phases right through it, either an echo or spirit. Miku hesitates but then follows close behind. She disappears beyond the door too, and then–

Color returns to their vision.

Miu turns to Mio. "That woman... Was she part of the novelist's team?"

"I think so." Mio motions to Miu's bag. "It sort of looked like Takamine's assistant, Hirasaka Tomoe. It's hard to tell from this far away..."

Miu pulls the newspaper back out and holds it out in front of them. Alongside Mr. Ogata's and Mr. Takamine's photos is another of a woman. She has deep, compassionate eyes and a kind smile. Her image seems to match with the vestige in the echo.

Miu frowns down at the photo. "Another lost soul to follow. She didn't make it either."

"I hope, for her sake, she went more peacefully than Mr. Ogata," Mio helps tuck the newspaper back in Miu's bag before reaching for her hand again, "but given the circumstances, I doubt it."

They all sigh somberly.

Following the echo, they begin to cross the atrium towards the tucked-away door.

As they step beneath the cherry blossom tree, Yuri feels something strange crunch beneath her boot– something that sounds and feels like broken glass. Stooping down to investigate, she finds small fragments of a dusty stone scattered and mixed in with the gravel. She picks a piece up and carefully swipes her thumb over the sharp shard, cleaning off its face to reveal what lies beneath the dust.

Her heart sinks in her chest until she's nauseous at what she finds.

A stone, black as night.

It's reflective.

Like a mirror.

Beside her, she feels Hisoka's heart sinking too. She recognizes the possibility of the shard's origin as well.

"That better not be what I think it is."

Miu's voice is low and grim.

It causes Yuri to tear her gaze away from the stone, turning it up towards her instead.

Staring at the shard in Yuri's hand, Miu's eyes are dark and her expression is dour. She's decidedly not happy about its presence here, in the mansion that caused her mother so much pain, or about the implications it could have. Mio looks on with a grave expression as well, an uncomfortable recognition flashing in her eyes as if she too knows about the shards, possibly from experience.

"It might not be," Yuri mumbles, rolling her thumb over the fragment again. If these are stone mirror shards, they're completely depleted. It feels like a regular piece of shattered glass, cold

and quiet like plain old stone– nothing more, nothing less. Who knows how long they've been left lying here. "I can't sense anything from it if it is. There's not even any echoes attached."

She can't help but swallow nervously anyway. Could she have been wrong? Could this be why the echoes are distorted here?

No.

She trusts Miku. The echoes would be erased, not distorted. Her conviction is enough.

She offers the shard up to Hisoka. Hisoka accepts it from her, turning it between her hands and squinting down at it, reaching out to it with her sixth sense. She eventually shakes her head, confirming Yuri's assessment. She hands the shard to Miu, who does the same, letting her abilities wash over the fragment before shaking her head as well.

The shard is tossed back to the ground to lie in silence with the others.

Just another stone in the landscape.

"Do you think Ren could find us more of these?" Miu plucks at the amulet and obsidian bracelet wrapped around Yuri's wrist, ignoring Yuri as she swats at her hand with a grumpy frown. Her question is directed towards Hisoka. "If our shards– well, *when* our shards eventually fade, it might be smart to have something on hand to help us in their place. Who knows how much longer the protection will last. It already feels like it's barely there anymore." Then she grumbles under her breath, mostly to herself, but she's definitely eyeing Yuri specifically out of the corner of her gaze, "And we definitely don't want to go about shattering another one..."

"Well, they don't function quite the same," Hisoka gently reminds as they proceed through the tucked-away door. "They don't truly repel malevolent spirits like the stone mirror shards. They merely keep their influence from affecting us and keep the echoes and energies at bay. Again, it's more like a filter than a true protection ward."

The area they've arrived in appears to be a small harbor of sorts. There's a broken waterwheel, coated in moss and detached from its axle, resting idly in a shallow aqueduct. What remains of a jetty juts out into the substantial body of water, the source the aqueduct draws from– either a small lake or a really large pond. A set of stone lanterns lines the path to the pier, unlit, abandoned, and slowly falling to ruin.

Hisoka smiles as she continues, "But they could still be useful to keep around, so maybe. Or, with some research, we could try to fashion our own, like you did with those bracelets you made for Mio and Kei. The obsidian was easy enough to find. As long as we're respectful, I'm sure we could gather a bit more. We still might need to request the blessing of the shrine maidens first though– or their descendants anyway. It's the amulet that might prove difficult to replicate. Perhaps I could ask Riri if she still has any of my mentor's books on the old religion lying around..." She hums thoughtfully, trailing off and getting lost in her musing.

"Hisoka." Miu pulls her right back out, drawing her wandering attention with the sound of her name. She stares at her intently, amusement hidden beneath her deadpan. "We *are* the

descendants."

"Oh, right." Yuri perks up. She turns to Hisoka with a cheeky grin. "Does that mean you'll bless us?"

Hisoka's expression immediately shifts to something exasperated– a combination of an unimpressed narrowing of her eyes and a twitch of her lips, quirking them into an annoyed smirk.

Yuri's grin widens.

Oh yes. Very blessed indeed.

Miu snorts and shoves Yuri's shoulder.

Hisoka huffs and rolls her eyes. "I meant someone more connected to the religion. Like the village elders or maybe one of my mentor's old friends. I'll reach out to them when we get home..."

"I'm just saying, considering we all got dragged into caskets under the influence of hostile ghosts, I'd say they'd be more than just 'useful to have around.'" Miu idly waves a hand, speaking rather flippantly about a rather sensitive subject. She's eyeing one of the stone lanterns standing along the shore suspiciously. The top of it has been removed. There's an indent carved into it as if something important was once hidden inside.

"...I...wasn't under any influence then..." Hisoka looks away as she admits, staring off across the water.

"Maybe not fully at first, but you definitely were when we found you," Miu counters, placing a hand on her hip and giving Hisoka a displeased look. "And technically neither was I. But my mom was. Haruka was too." She furrows her brow and then turns to squint at Yuri. "Didn't you nearly get locked in a casket too? In the other week, before your stone mirror shattered? I think I remember seeing you fighting to hold the casket doors open– which I still find impressive, by the way. You held out for quite a while and still managed to fight your way out. It couldn't have been easy..."

Yuri shrugs awkwardly. She can feel Hisoka's eyes on her. She somewhat reluctantly nods, watching her expression closely out of the corner of her eye. "The Funeral Celebrant had a Dark Sun Mirror. It blinded me, and then the next thing I knew, the doors were shutting in front of me."

"You... You never told me..." Hisoka mumbles, sounding a little hurt.

"I didn't want you to worry," Yuri whispers back, hurt that she caused her to hurt. "It didn't happen again after the stone mirror shattered, so it's like it never happened–"

"But you still have memories of it, Yuri," Hisoka argues, looking even more distraught. "I still care..."

As they go back and forth, none of them catch the distant look Mio has in her eyes again. Something about their conversation, about the compulsive powers of vengeful spirits and the repercussions that follow, has her mind somewhere else, somewhere far, far away. Somewhere that doesn't exist as it used to anymore. Somewhere she can never return. She's physically here but mentally gone.

At her prolonged silence, Miu finally notices. Then Hisoka and Yuri notice too.

Miu reaches for her hand, a deep worry in her eyes. Her touch startles Mio but pulls her back to them. Mio masks her pain with a small smile, tilting her head questioningly at the younger girls as if nothing had happened.

"What do you think this place was used for?" Miu asks her gently, carefully steering them towards a different topic.

Mio hums, glancing around. "I'm not sure. The waterwheel probably supplied fresh water for drinking and irrigation." She nods towards the broken wheel before glancing back out across the water. She motions towards a small island at the end of what remains of the pier. "That...kind of looks like a grave marker out there. Maybe they used this place to dispose of their deceased? Not a very sanitary practice if they also drew drinking water from here..."

"That would explain the shadows, though..." Yuri mumbles, staring out at the lichen-crusted cairn in the distance. There are more fading shadows pooled over it and even further out, scattered across the surface of the lake.

Tragedy must have struck. Perhaps the cairn was set to memorialize the lives lost.

Or possibly the lives *taken*.

There's something disquieting in the air here too, hanging around the cairn and over the water like a black mist. It's particularly dense near the waterwheel. When Yuri looks back towards it, she finds Hisoka is already examining it, her eyes washing over it curiously.

"I think..." Hisoka mutters under her breath, squinting at the deteriorating wooden remains. "I think a seal was placed here. Maybe not the one on that door from earlier, but there was definitely something here at one point. Something powerful."

Tugging on Yuri gently, she turns back to her, wordlessly asking for her help reading the echo. Her lower lip is jutted out in a pout again, recalling her refusal from earlier.

Sensing the dense darkness, Yuri hesitates, wrestling with her inherent desire to protect. When she allows her senses to reach out for the echoes, just barely brushing across the surface, she can feel something ominous reverberating within them. It's saturating the space and time around the wheel with what can only be violence and death.

She promised herself that she'd be fair to Hisoka.

It's a little harder to carry out that promise in practice, knowing the cost at which it comes.

Hisoka lets out a small, grumpy growl of frustration from the back of her throat, finally furrowing her brow at her. Yuri ducks her head sheepishly, repressing a crooked grin and fighting not to giggle in response.

She's going to get herself in so much trouble.

She really can't help herself; her love is so cute when she's like this.

Turning her eyes up towards the sky, she heaves a reluctant sigh before asking with a mere whisper, just to make absolutely certain, "Are you sure you want to see? I can tell it's bad. Really bad. I don't want to hurt you."

Hisoka scrunches her nose as if the notion seems ridiculous to her; Yuri would never hurt her. At least, never intentionally. They both know that. She stops to consider for a moment anyway, taking her concerns seriously.

Yuri waits patiently, still just watching her out of the corner of her eye. Finally, Hisoka draws up her courage and nods, meeting Yuri's sideways gaze directly. There's a glint of unwavering resolve shining in her eyes, making it clear that she's ready to face anything so long as they're facing it together. Yuri nods in return, steadying herself to dive back in, this time with Hisoka at her side.

Behind them, she can feel Miu and Mio watching them. They're both apprehensive, bracing themselves for the echo as well, but they're also still unable to hide their amusement at their ongoing antics.

Brushing it off and sharpening her focus, Yuri begins to reach deeper into shadows. With their hands intertwined, she can feel the gentle spark of Hisoka's sixth sense flaring again, effortlessly intertwining with her own. They find their equilibrium, their heartbeats and breathing falling into perfect sync. Then, together, they push past the bracelet's protection and cast out.

Their vision turns to grey. Then Yuri hears–

The tick, tick, ticking of the waterwheel.

It turns on its spoke, churning up the water with each rhythmic revolution. For a moment, hundreds of faint echoes are mixing and overlapping, rushing by rapidly in front of them. Silhouettes of people come and go, seasons pass, the lake rises and falls, time marches on, but the waterwheel remains exactly the same, ticking steadily on until–

"Mr. Takamine!"

The woman from before, the one Miku had been following– Tomoe– struggles against invisible bindings. They've already burnt deep marks into the skin of her wrists and ankles, and now she's choking on another, fighting to get free as it's searing into her neck.

Then, she stops. The final mark appears.

Her fate is sealed.

She falls still as if she's been granted reprieve, struggling to catch her breath. Fighting to stay upright, she clutches at her neck, pawing at the fresh mark as if it could make the pain subside.

Suddenly, she tenses. Her eyes start to widen. She senses something. Something horrible. Something drawing closer.

A sinister shadow materializes behind her, slowly taking form from the darkness. It's the same one from Mr. Ogata's final moments, drenched in corruption and malice. Tomoe fearfully turns to face her. She meets the woman's cloaked gaze, hidden behind her hair, and then gasps as if the ropes are being tightened around her limbs again.

The screams of terror and agony begin once more.

The malice lashes out.

Beside her, Yuri hears Hisoka gasp and whimper. She feels her fear and sorrow flooding into her and nearly pulls away again, desperate to protect her.

She stops herself, gritting her teeth.

Loosening her grip, she doesn't let go, but she puts the choice entirely in Hisoka's hands: pull away or hold on, bear witness or retreat, face terror or remain blissfully unaware. She was given the gift of choice. She must be willing to share her gift with her love.

Hisoka tightens her grip.

Holding on as long as she can, Hisoka jolts, flinching at the sickening sound and sight of snapping bones and slipping joints as they're violently wrenched out of socket. When it's too much, she gives in. She doesn't let go, but she turns away and into Yuri, hiding herself in her arms.

Yuri holds her close, cradling her until it's finally over.

Tomoe's body slumps to the dirt. It's still intact but viciously mangled, completely devoid of life.

Behind her, the waterwheel ticks on indifferently–

Color floods back into the world. The waterwheel falls silent, returning to its shattered state submerged in the ditch.

The sunlight returns as well, chasing the shadows from their minds and gently warming their skin. The world they emerge in is vibrant and peaceful, so completely removed from the dark memories they just sought out and witnessed.

Despite it, Yuri closes her eyes.

Her solace comes in the sensation of Hisoka's ribs expanding and contracting beneath her fingers as they both stand catching their breath. In Hisoka's warmth. In her heartbeat. In her

mere presence.

She doesn't need anything more.

Hisoka is shaking violently. She's clinging to her, her face tucked down and buried against her neck. She seems frustrated with herself, at her inability to look on such violence despite her own insistence at seeing it.

Yuri could never fault her. It never gets easier.

Behind them, Miu and Mio seem to be steadying themselves as well. They've witnessed another innocent life taken, but it doesn't feel as if they are any closer to unraveling the dark mysteries of the mansion, echoing in the air all around them. As she's soothing Hisoka, silently chasing away the fear and the lingering sensations of death, Yuri listens as they talk. She lets their soft voices ground her and then uses that calm to help Hisoka find her way back too.

"Miu..." Mio's voice is gentle as she calls her name, worry and care evident in her tone. "Are you okay?"

Miu remains quiet for a long moment. Yuri can't feel her as readily with the bracelet, but she knows her best friend. She knows her better than almost anyone else in the world.

She can tell Miu is deeply conflicted.

People who go looking for the supernatural often find far more than they could ever hope to handle. They're no strangers to this truth. At least they have their sixth sense and supernatural vision to guide them. Perhaps, the novelist's team didn't believe in the danger they were putting themselves in. Perhaps they didn't care. Perhaps they didn't recognize it until it was too late. Whichever it was, they didn't deserve the fate that befell them.

"I just..." Miu finally starts and then stops, sighing heavily. "They didn't deserve this. Especially not her. She knew they shouldn't have come here, but she went along anyway..." It sounds like she's shaking her head. Yuri can envision the upset expression she's bearing without turning her head to face her. "But I'm also not surprised. They came here looking for a ghost story to exploit, knowing the history of violence and tragedy this place held. Well, they certainly found what they were looking for. It only cost them their lives..."

"Even if it's not surprising, it's still hard to see," Mio sounds so remorseful, as if she feels like she should be trying harder to protect them from it. As if she even could. "You feel it too. Their fear and pain. You shouldn't have to. None of you should. I'm…I'm so sorry."

Miu huffs a humorless laugh. She doesn't sound unkind, just wry. "Now *you* sound like Mama..." Then she shrugs half-heartedly. "I've been seeing things like this my whole life. Yuri has too. We're kind of used to it by now."

Yuri finally glances back at Miu over her shoulder. Miu gives her a small, fond but deeply wistful smile. Hisoka's arms tighten around Yuri. They all three sigh heavily again.

"That doesn't make it any better," Mio insists, looking between them all with a deep frown.

Miu nods, downplaying but not denying it. "No, I guess not." She shifts uncomfortably before finally giving in, allowing herself to be vulnerable. "It's just... hard... seeing her like this."

"Your mother?"

Miu nods again, staring across the space as if she's seeing Miku's echo. Maybe she is. Maybe she isn't. Either way, her eyes are so dark with pain. Yuri doesn't need to touch her to understand.

Staring at her with a sad sort of curiosity, Mio tilts her head. She asks gently, coaxing her to continue, "Seeing her...like what?"

Miu blinks, pulling herself back into herself. Then, she swallows harshly. "Lost. Scared. Searching for the one person who could make her feel better, the one who is always just out of her reach." Her voice falls a little quieter, a little more raw. "All alone…" She trails off, falling quiet for a moment. Then, clearing her throat, she tries to brush it off again, but the mood is already somber. She offers another weak smile, this time to Hisoka, who's peering back at her over Yuri's shoulder. "Hisoka was right though. My mom's trace leads back the way we came. She must have broken a seal here with the spirit camera and then doubled back. Whether it was the seal on that door or not is still up for debate, but at least we're back on the right track..."

Laying her cheek against Yuri's shoulder as she rests against her, Hisoka offers Miu a small smile in return, offering her comfort and warmth. She's calmer now, steady in Yuri's arms. The dregs of the echo, the lasting emotions and anguish that spilled out, are finally fading.

Miu takes her wordless reassurance in stride.

Drawing her shoulders back, she turns on her heel and leads them back out to the atrium, leaving the waterwheel and the abyss it draws from behind them.

***

On the short walk back to the mansion, Hisoka finds her voice. It's still pretty small, but she leans in close to Yuri and whispers so only she can hear.

"Thank you."

Yuri tilts her head, giving her a confused look. She whispers back just as quietly. "For what?"

"For not leaving me behind." Hisoka says it so earnestly, looking up at her from beneath her lashes. She's clearly still a little disoriented, her eyes fluttering in the sunlight, but she holds Yuri's hand in a sure, strong grip, comfortably leaning into her as they follow just behind Miu and Mio.

Yuri sighs softly, bringing Hisoka's knuckles to her lips in apology. That was never her intention. She'll do better from now on. "We're supposed to go together. I'm sorry I've been straying too far ahead."

"I know you want to protect me." Hisoka's sigh is more subdued as she shakes her head. "I trust you. I trust your judgment. And I'm still learning. If you think a shadow is too deep for me, then–"

"Then we'll go together or not at all," Yuri cuts her off adamantly. "I can't always help it when I'm not wearing this bracelet. And I'm not always going to win against my impulses or my instincts. But while I'm wearing it, I can at least choose what to expose myself to– what to expose *us* to. But if there's something that you want to see and need my help, then–"

"Then we can decide if it's worth the risk together." Hisoka interrupts her in return, catching her gaze with an adamant look of her own. Then her expression softens again. "And as long as they don't get you hurt, I never mind your impulses. Just promise me that you'll keep holding on to me, okay? So that I can pull you back to me if I need to..."

"Okay. I promise."

Yuri's smile at their vow starts out sweet.

Slowly, though, it begins to grow into a playful grin as gears start to turn in her head. She watches a brief flash of confusion take shape in Hisoka's eyes before it's replaced with a look of suspicious amusement. She can practically hear what she's thinking: *what are you up to now?*

This time, though, she'll keep her musings to herself.

Another gift from her beloved: permission to hold her, regardless of circumstances. Hisoka never specified *how*. She just requested that she continue.

Yuri can certainly manage that. With great pleasure and zeal even.

Letting out a small huff, Hisoka rolls her eyes and looks away, leaving her to her mischief. She's definitely still curious though– the tips of her ears are turning red.

"It looks like..." Miu finally steals their attention back as they reach the front steps to the porch. Her gaze is sweeping back and forth along the side of the mansion. "She stopped by that creepy room with the dolls but then came back this way towards that door with the seal."

They follow her to the door in question, the one with the scorch mark in the wood. Proceeding through it, they find themselves in a hallway with another set of stairs winding up to a floor above. Another large mirror coated in thick cobwebs stands in the corner directly across from them, reflecting a path leading behind the stairs.

Miu pauses in her Shadowreading to stare at the mirror for a moment, furrowing her brow. The others all stop to examine it beside her.

"It's odd, isn't it...?" Hisoka mumbles, eyeing it uneasily. "There are quite a few of these around the mansion. I wonder what they were used for."

"They seem to all be placed in the junctions between hallways." Mio hums thoughtfully. "Maybe they were used to keep an eye out for danger around blind corners."

"Yeah, but what kind of danger?" Miu eyes their clouded reflection in the mirror with a suspicious glare. Her reflection eyes them right back. "Living? …Or dead?"

"Probably both." Mio is watching Miu closely out of the corner of her eye. She seems to be avoiding her own reflection– whether it's intentional or not is left to be said. Perhaps it's an old habit. Yuri can empathize with her avoidance either way. "You said the Himuro family was very powerful in the region. They likely had their fair share of enemies. Not to mention, they built their home on top of the hell gate..."

"Hmph. Or the house was here first..." Miu finally turns away from the mirror, decidedly unimpressed. She starts down the hallway that leads behind the stairs. "My mom has always been sort of wary around reflective surfaces. She's always keeping an eye on them, watching them out of the corner of her eye. I'm starting to think I know why..."

The trace leads them into a very peculiar room at the end of the corridor. It appears to be some sort of preserve or fishtank room. Miu freezes upon stepping inside. Her confusion seems different this time, more potent, as if she somehow expected to see something else.

Or at the very least, not *this* particular room.

"What's wrong?" Mio glances around the room, searching for the source of Miu's intensified perturbation. "Are we still going the right way, or did the echo turn back...?"

Miu shakes her head, trying to brush off her uncertainty. Stepping forward, she tests her weight on one of the makeshift bridges spanning the gaps between platforms. When she's satisfied that the rotten wood will hold them, she slowly starts to cross, holding Mio's hand and gently tugging her along with her.

The wood creaks dangerously beneath their feet. It bows, but it holds.

Looking back over her shoulder, Miu opens her mouth as if she's finally going to answer.

Before she can, the entire room goes grey.

A powerful echo begins, playing out for all of them to see, and–

Miku steps carefully across the bridge just in front of Miu, each step calculated and deliberate. The wood creaks dangerously beneath her feet, just as it had for them.

Her hand is resting over her heart and her breathing is shaking, stuttering as if she's scared. Despite existing in front of her as a mere echo, Yuri can practically hear Miku's heartbeat, pounding in time with the anxious beating of her own as she watches helplessly from the future.

There's something in the room with them.

They can all sense it. Miku can too.

It emerges in the darkness slowly, a flickering silhouette drawing closer and closer until it's looming right behind her.

In the present, Yuri hears Miu's quiet gasp.

"Mom..."

The shadow closes in on Miku, its arms reaching out to ensnare her. It's that woman. The one from the waterwheel, the assistant– Tomoe. Her soul has been twisted, turned violent and vengeful by the curse, just like her colleague, Mr. Ogata.

Miku finally notices the hands grasping for her out of her peripherals. She turns and stumbles, falling backwards with a scream.

"Mom!" Miu jolts forward, reaching out and trying to catch her, trying to protect her mother–

She slips, nearly falling into the water.

Mio catches her at the last second.

Still holding onto her hand, she pulls Miu back to her, wrapping her in her arms. She refuses to let go.

"I've got you! I won't... I won't let go–"

Color returns to their vision once more.

Miu is blinking furiously as the echo evaporates, shaking and out of breath. Tears of frustration are forming in the corners of her eyes. She shakes her head again, this time in annoyance. Her expression falls to a scowl. "Right... just an echo. Sorry. I think... I think this place is messing with my head."

Mio releases her slowly, a wary look of concern in her eyes.

Miu's scowl shifts to a small frown. She squeezes Mio's hand, a small show of gratitude for her care. Then, keeping a hold of her, she gently tugs Mio forward again, setting them back on their path across the bridges.

Yuri keeps a hold of Hisoka's hand too. She holds her steady as they follow close behind.

They cross in pairs, taking extra care to keep their weight evenly distributed. As they're slowly but surely making their way to the other side, Miu is subtly glancing around, watching behind them as if expecting something more to appear.

The world remains in vibrant color. No other echoes try to hijack their senses, not here.

When they reach the final platform, she stares at the door at the very end, the confusion still prominent across her features. Reaching out, she traces her fingers over the odd symbols in what Yuri can only assume is the Himuro family crest; it's all over the place, on doors and tapestries, carved into wood and woven into fabrics, all left behind to rot with the rest of the mansion. Miu's expression remains troubled, even as they push through and into what appears to be some sort of backyard.

Much like the atrium, the backyard seems peaceful at a glance, filled with dancing sunlight as it streams through a small grove of bamboo trees. The gloom present, however, is a little more obvious: the yard is filled with graves. A stone well stands across from them. Its presence alone is heavy. Shadows are seeping out forebodingly from beneath the edges of its dense lid.

Yuri shivers as they walk towards the path cutting through the middle of the yard, through the bamboo and past the eerie well and gravestones. She can't shake the feeling that she's being watched. When she turns to look over her shoulder, following the sensation, she finds an odd room on the second floor of the mansion overlooking the yard. The bars on the window make it seem like some sort of prison. She can feel dark echoes radiating from it too.

As she's considering casting out to them, another echo emerges, forcing its way into her senses and playing out in front of her instead.

Caught off guard, she jumps as her vision goes grey. Hisoka steadies her, and then, together, they see–

Miku drawing back towards them, scanning through the trees with the Camera Obscura held at the ready. There's a dark shape floating and weaving through the gravestones, barely visible but slowly closing in.

"Tell him... tell him..."

Miku swallows roughly, adjusting her grip on the camera. She plants her feet, preparing for the worst before drawing up the courage to call back. "T– Tell him what?"

The shadow abruptly disappears from view. They all stiffen, eyes searching through the trees, trying to locate it in the dark. Miku remains still, breathing heavily but standing her ground, listening intently and reaching out with her senses. She holds her breath and waits. In the present, they all do the same.

Suddenly, Miku gasps. Spinning as fast as she can, she turns in time to find the tortured visage of Tomoe looming right behind her again, reaching out and trying to draw her into her grasp–

The camera goes off in Miku's hands, sending out a brilliant flash. Tomoe reels back, crying out in pain.

Briefly disappearing again, Tomoe reappears on the opposite side of the yard near the well. Her frame is sagging forward, dangling in midair like a marionette hung by strings. She jerks and jolts and then begins to utter a low, eerie laugh.

It builds, growing louder and louder, dissolving into something crazed and unhinged.

Then, she throws back her head and lets out a shrieking cackle.

All of the girls– Miku's echo included– let out startled yelps and cries, reaching up to tightly cover their ears. The sound is painful and disorienting, causing their vision to blur. The echo seems to amplify the effect; years of distilling, reverberating through the gravestones and bamboo, have caused the effect to magnify.

As if sensing their pain, even from the past, Miku's echo bravely steps forward, shaking off her own disorientation to stand in front of them. She raises the camera once more to engage in battle with the assistant.

Miku wastes no more time in exorcizing the troubled spirit, capturing images of soul and darkness in each frame of 35mm film. The scene flashes in time with the camera as she fights, illuminating their vision with blinding light.

Eventually, Tomoe's spirit collapses into a bright, fiery wisp.

It's absorbed by the camera, disappearing inside, sealed away with Mr. Ogata's, and then–

As abruptly as it began, the echo ends.

Miu sighs, rubbing her head as if it's still hurting. She's been using her Shadowreading for a while now. The typical strain combined with the intensity of the echoes is inducing a heavy toll. "That's two of the novelist's team," she finally mutters through her grimace. "I have a feeling I know what happened to the third..."

Hearts and minds heavy, the others concur but remain silent. They push on. The trace shows them the way.

Yet another door is tucked away at the very back of the yard. Yuri can't help but feel like the mansion was deliberately designed to be as disorienting as possible, a labyrinth filled with twisting paths and dark secrets. The former occupants clearly wanted it to be as difficult as possible to navigate– and even harder to escape. Miu guides them through it, still following her mother's trail.

The path beyond leads to a long, steep set of steps. It's lined with trees wound in ceremonial ropes and cuts back deeper into the forest. At the very top is a tall, sun-bleached torii gate standing before a foreboding wooden structure– likely another shrine by the look of it. They all climb the staircase together, one careful step at a time.

When they reach the top, they heave open the heavy, creaking doors to the shrine. As they enter, they're immediately greeted by a large but faded stain on the ground, tinting the floorboards a dark, rusted brown.

It looks like blood.

They all stare down at it with matching grimaces.

"Yep," Miu mutters grimly, "Three for three."

Taking a look around yields two more large mirrors– one dirty but intact, the other completely shattered– and an odd altar with several Buddha statues resting inside, neatly arranged within some sort of grid. The statues all bear unnerving stains as well, each sporting a smear of dark red and damage across a separate limb. Despite being removed from the Himuro Mansion's main grounds, the shrine bears the same eerie darkness, the same sinister, reverberating echoes. This place was clearly once just as haunted.

As she's warily eyeing the cracked mirror from a safe distance away, Yuri suddenly feels another shift– an apprehension bleeding into her through her hand. She turns to find Hisoka staring up at the ceiling, a look of trepidation and unease on her face.

Slowly, Yuri turns her gaze up too. She tenses as she finds out why.

There's a deeper darkness hanging in the rafters, strung out among the beams. Another violent echo. Hisoka meets her gaze out of the corner of her eye, swallowing roughly. Her grip on Yuri's hand tightens. She gives her a single stiff nod.

"Miu..."

Yuri draws Miu's attention before directing it towards the rafters above them as well. Miu furrows her brow and then glances up. Upon sensing it, her expression darkens knowingly. She gives Yuri a single nod too.

With Hisoka's hand in hers, Yuri begins to cast out towards the echo. When it's in reach, she carefully begins to push in, easing them in bit by bit. Their vision goes grey, and then they see–

A tortured man, brutally crucified on the ceiling.

He's held in place amongst beams by writhing, disembodied hands, clawing at his sickeningly contorted body. His face is twisted, frozen in an endless scream of terror and agony.

Yuri recognizes him immediately. She remembers him from the newspaper clipping.

It's Takamine Junsei, the famed novelist.

Or what's left of him…

In front of her, she hears a small, terrified gasp, distorted slightly within the echo. Looking back down, she finds Miku's vestige standing beside them, staring up with fear shining in her eyes. Her form is more solid than Mr. Takamine's. She must be viewing the echo of his demise, just as they are now.

Another echo within an echo...

Suddenly, Takamine's corpse jolts where it hangs. They all startle, Miku included.

Then, without warning, he drops from the ceiling, plummeting at an alarming rate. They all jerk back, stumbling away to avoid the impact, bracing for the sickening sound of his body colliding with the floorboards–

The sound never comes.

When they look back up, the echo has changed, collapsing back down into a single layer, a single moment in time. They find Miku in the center of the room, turning and searching frantically, camera held at the ready once more. A shadow is circling her– stalking her. It appears to be the warped silhouette of a man.

Again, Yuri quickly realizes who it is.

It's Takamine.

He's now a violent spectre, just like his editor and assistant.

Takamine doesn't articulate his terror like Mr. Ogata or his despair like Tomoe. The once-author's vocalizations are raw and filled with rage, incoherent screams of agony– pain he clearly wishes to inflict on anyone who crosses his path.

Currently, his sights are set on Miku.

Miku fights valiantly, catching his ghost in film and driving him back each time he lunges. The battle carries on, camera flash after camera flash, lunge after lunge, until finally she's victorious. Takamine's spirit shrinks down into a fiery wisp as well. The camera absorbs it, sealing him away with his two companions.

The novelist's team is put to rest.

When it's over, Miku remains still for a moment, catching her breath with a hand resting over her heart. She looks upset and forlorn, aching from what she's just witnessed, from what she's just experienced. She's no closer to finding her brother. The odds of him being alive aren't looking good.

But she can't give up yet.

The scene flashes and changes once again.

Miku has done her best to pull her resolve and composure back together. She continues on, deftly solving the mystery that Takamine, in his final moments, could not. Her reward comes in the form of some sort of mirror fragment, retrieved from its place locked away inside the altar.

The shard is unique, entirely unlike a stone mirror. It's something else, something more powerful, something almost divine. It catches in the meager beam of Miku's flashlight and reflects it back blindingly, almost as if amplifying it. The light reminds Yuri of the flash of the Camera Obscura. She's not sure why.

Miku tenses again, her breath catching in her throat. She turns slowly towards the intact mirror beside her. They turn with her and find the source of her unease.

The woman in the white kimono is standing behind Miku's reflection. She's looming menacingly, watching her through the glass and slowly creeping closer.

Drawing her courage once more, Miku quickly turns to face her.

There's nothing there.

When she looks back towards the mirror again, the woman in the kimono is even closer, eclipsing her reflection now. The woman arrives at the mirror but doesn't stop. She emerges in the room with Miku through the glass, phasing right through.

The scene flashes and changes yet again.

Miku is cornered.

She had tried desperately to escape but couldn't, and now the cursed spirit in the kimono, corrupted with violent malice, is nearly upon her. She has nowhere left to run.

The woman reaches out to grab her. Miku flinches away, cowering back with a cry.

Everything goes blindingly white, and then–

They all come out of the echo with a gasp, out of breath once more.

Blinking in the beams of sunlight streaming through the open doors of the shrine, Yuri furrows her brow, trying to locate Miku's echo again. She can sense Hisoka's confusion and feels her searching, casting out with her abilities too. Miu is anxiously scanning around the space, clutching her hair ornament in a slightly too-tight grip. They're all trying to see what happened next, trying to find Miku, trying to make sure she's okay– they know she is, *now*, but if that dark spirit got her hands on her back then...

Despite their best efforts, they all come up empty-handed. Miku's echo is gone. It's somehow vanished into thin air.

Turning to face them, Miu huffs.

"Great. Now we've got to find her again..."

Yuri and Hisoka share a look. Mio looks between them all sympathetically.

They all let out a deep sigh.

Chapter End Notes

Oof, how frustrating. The trace broke like a cut cord. Aren't those things supposed to be completely linear in time? Oh well, time to find the next one...

Thanks for reading! More soon!

Chapter 4: Demon Tag pt.1

Chapter Notes

> Alrighty everyone, buckle up. Demon Tag is a looooooong chapter with lots of secrets to reveal. The girls are in for a ride...
>
> Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Miku's echo slips through their grasp, they decide on taking a short break.

A lot has happened. They've witnessed several violent deaths and terrible tragedies, and yet they feel no closer to uncovering the truth behind the calamity of the mansion.

Yuri frowns from where she's seated on the forest shrine's front step, curled firmly against Hisoka's side. She can see Miu's hands trembling. Miu is rubbing at her temples as if the migraine that had been looming over her has finally settled in.

The echoes surrounding them are so heavy and intense, even through the influence of the bracelet. Miu is facing them head-on with no way to defend herself. She may have better control over her psychic senses, but she's still vulnerable, especially in such abyssal darkness.

Despite her ache and exhaustion though, Yuri can also sense that Miu is restless, eager to persevere and push on. She's seated beside them but hasn't given herself even a moment of reprieve; she's still searching, casting out with her abilities, trying to locate her mother's vanished trace. It's nowhere to be found– or at least currently nowhere in their vicinity. She's frustrated and putting herself, both her body and her mind, under terrible strain.

Yuri worries.

She's not the only one. Hisoka and Mio have been watching over Miu too, brows furrowed in concern.

Hisoka can clearly sense Miu's persistence on the matter. She recognizes the determined shine in her eyes and can sense her scanning for the trace too. Her fingers have been unconsciously tapping on top of Yuri's thigh, anxiously fidgeting as she considers intervening.

Yuri isn't quite sure of the full extent of Mio’s psychic abilities, but she seems to be able to sense Miu's searching as well. Mio worked in tandem with Rei and Kei for years, chasing after and facing down the supernatural to find Miku; she definitely has some sort of sixth sense of her own. Her abilities may not be powerful enough to sense the gentle soul tethered

to her, hidden deep within, but she can still sense the echoes and see wandering spirits. Sometimes she just needs a little bit of help to do so.

When Miu can no longer sit idly, her impatience getting the better of her, she rises back up to her feet. Descending the last few steps, she adjusts her bag and dusts herself off before turning back to face them. "Are we ready? We should keep moving. I don't really want to be here after it gets dark."

"Miu," Hisoka starts as she rises to follow her. Yuri is just behind, quick to give chase. "Why don't I take over for a bit?"

"What?" Miu gives her a look that's both incredulous and exasperated. "Why? We just got here."

"You're exhausted," Hisoka counters, pointing out the fact in a manner that's equal parts gentle and firm. Negotiating with Miu can be a delicate process on mundane days, but even more so when she's already on edge. "You said it yourself: the shadows here aren't normal. They're putting a heavier strain on you than our typical Shadowreading. You'll send yourself into a full-blown inundation migraine if you don't let yourself rest..."

Miu remains defensive, narrowing her eyes and crossing her arms. "Why would I let you take over then? You're more susceptible to the migraines than I am. I don't want you exposed either."

"That's...fair, I suppose." Hisoka winces, shifting awkwardly and averting her gaze. Miu isn't wrong. And beneath the defensiveness, she's genuinely being thoughtful. Her resistance is out of love, not contempt. She's trying to protect Hisoka from pain that is sure to come. "But I also have the most experience with Shadowreading. My sixth sense might not be as powerful or as sensitive, but I've been sifting through shadows to find missing objects and people for a long time." She turns her gaze back to Miu, meeting her obstinance with a fierce determination of her own. She motions towards the Hinasaki hairpin still gripped tightly in Miu's hand. "With a proper token, I should be able to locate Miku's trace without too much trouble. I can take care of the Shadowreading so that you and Yuri can focus on using your glancing to reveal the memories of what happened here."

Miu hesitates, pausing to contemplate the offer. Her scowl lingers as she weighs her options. After a moment, she makes a small, frustrated noise, her expression scrunching further. She knows Hisoka is right; even if her sixth sense wasn't always as developed as it is now, Hisoka still has the most experience in the art of Shadowreading.

Surrendering to this fact, Miu finally relents. Somewhat begrudgingly, she hands over the hairclip, trading it for the spirit flashlight. Hisoka accepts it from her carefully, cradling it between her palms.

"Just..." Miu's defensiveness falls away. Her expression softens to something worried and almost pleading as she looks up at Hisoka. "...be careful, okay?"

Hisoka tilts her head, briefly glancing down at the treasured heirloom. "With this? Of course, I'll keep it safe–"

"No," Miu cuts her off, a small, fond smile finally breaking through. "With your head. And your heart. They're sensitive. Like Mama's."

"Oh." Hisoka huffs, rolling her eyes. Her mildly irked smile is fond too. She doesn't deny the accusations. "Of course."

At last returning the way they came, they follow the path down and back towards the mansion.

Yuri and Hisoka lead the way this time. As they descend the stone steps, Hisoka holds the hairclip with one hand and Yuri's hand with the other; she's just barely grazing over the clip with her psychic senses, not fully honing in just yet. Yuri can tell she's waiting until they're closer to the source to start searching through the shadows.

Halfway down, Mio breaks her silence. She's been awfully quiet for a while, perhaps even a little lost in thought. Despite it, she's still been keeping a careful eye on the girls as they worked out their plans.

Her inquisitiveness is directed towards Hisoka.

"Do you see the echoes the same way they do?"

Hisoka glances back at her over her shoulder before shrugging. "Sort of. Sometimes, if they're powerful enough, they catch me by surprise, but most of the time, I have to truly focus to see them on my own. My sixth sense became stronger, more refined, after my time in the black water and, um...my brief possession." *Her ephemeral death.* She winces, trying to soften the severity of the memory. "I used to only be able to sense the spirits and memories but could never truly see them. I could follow them to find things and feel the emotions attached, but it was all too fleeting for me to make much sense of."

"I think I know what you mean..." Mio nods as they arrive at the base of the stairs. They turn the corner and head towards the door to the backyard.

"I used to think of it as if I was pressing my hands against the surface of deep pools but could never push in deep enough to see what lay beneath," Hisoka continues, eyeing the graves between the trees warily. Yuri can tell she can sense the shadows tethered to them. They don't stop to investigate. They need to conserve her strength. Yuri helps her brush the stray echoes away for now, keeping her sheltered while she's finding her footing. "Now, I can feel everything more readily, but it's more like..." She pauses again to articulate, humming thoughtfully. Then she mumbles, nearly under her breath, "Like I'm walking alongside a branching stream..."

They come to a halt in the middle of the backyard. Hisoka glances around the space as if she's beginning to pick up on something, but her demeanor remains uncertain.

"A stream?" Mio leans forward to catch her gaze.

Hisoka meets her with a curious expression, a look that melts into a shy smile when Mio smiles at her encouragingly. "It's like...each trace is a path or a groove cut in time by every

experience and choice made. As time moves forward, the echoes of the past, the memories and emotions left behind, fill in these grooves, like water in a stream." She raises the Hinasaki heirloom, still held lightly in her palm. "A token is an object that has been imprinted with pieces of memories and feelings from a trace. They act sort of like compasses, always pointing to the streams from which their trace came. If the imprint is strong enough, I can use the token to follow the path the streams take through time, all the way to whatever it is I'm searching for. Along the way though, there are often places where the memories and emotions are particularly dense and powerful, like deep pools cut in the streams. If I'm careful, I can dive in to see what these pools reveal, but it's taxing and leaves me extremely vulnerable. If I'm not careful..."

"They could pull you under and drown you." Miu finishes Hisoka's thoughts, looking at her somberly but full of empathy and affection. She's been there before. They all have.

"And that's why you hold Yuri's hand," Mio adds, an expression similar to Miu's written across her features. "To keep you both from drowning. Or drifting away."

Hisoka glances awkwardly between them, a light blush building across her cheeks. Then, she scrunches her nose and averts her gaze again, grumbling in embarrassment, "Something like that, I suppose. I...can't always catch Yuri in time. I'm still learning how to swim."

Beside her, Yuri is giving her a tender look as well, full of deep adoration. Leaning in close, she gently nuzzles her head against Hisoka's, soundlessly expressing her gratitude and affection for the thoughtful woman who holds her whole heart.

Hisoka's expression softens again too. She's still looking away but biting her lip to hide a small, smitten smile.

When she finally glances back at Yuri out of the corner of her eye, her expression is warm and sweet but playfully reprimanding at the unabashed display of affection. It's clearly mostly for show; it's entirely offset by the look of matching adoration shining just as brightly in her eyes in return.

"Well, the good news is, right now, Yuri has a life jacket on," Miu vaguely waves at the obsidian bracelet wrapped around Yuri's wrist, "so you don't have to worry about her quite as much here. It should keep you both afloat while she's teaching you how."

Yuri starts to scowl, completely missing the lack of teasing in Miu's tone. Then, she sees Miu's fond smile turned towards her and pauses to really consider her words. The playful moniker rings in her mind as she turns her gaze down towards the bracelet. Suddenly, it looks different, *feels* different, wrapped around her wrist– less like a restraint and more like…

A lifeline.

Maybe it's not a muzzle. Maybe Miu is right; maybe it's a *life jacket*. And if Hisoka experiences these heavy echoes and fathomless shadows as if they are a deep and dangerous stream...

Then maybe, with it, she really can keep them both afloat.

"I'm still going to worry..." Hisoka chuckles, shyly shaking her head. "But you're right. Maybe we can learn how to swim together."

She beams at Yuri. Yuri feels her heart stutter in her chest. She gives Hisoka's hand a gentle squeeze. Hisoka squeezes her hand right back.

Then, letting out a long exhale, Hisoka steadies herself to truly begin the search. She begins to scan the area with her sixth sense, much like Miu had earlier. Yuri can feel her tentatively casting out, dipping the tips of her fingers in, testing the waters around them to find the right current.

In the midst of her scanning, Hisoka glances back at Miu out of the corner of her eye. "What exactly am I looking for? The next echo after what happened at the shrine or your mom's presence in general?"

Miu tilts her head curiously, pausing to consider the question. "I was searching for the next echoes in the timeline, but maybe that's why I was struggling here. Would searching for her presence be easier?"

"Yes and no. It's usually easier to pick a starting point and then work forward from there," Hisoka starts, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of either case. "I think here, though, it would be best to locate the right stream first. I should be able to find it without too much difficulty. From there, we might have to work backwards for a bit." Then she shakes her head again, furrowing her brow at the things she's picking up on more clearly with the hairclip in her hand. "Even with a token, the echoes here are convoluted and overlapping... I've never felt anything like this. Shadows are typically completely linear in time, but these ones..."

Yuri suddenly perks up. "Wait... '*work backwards*'?"

Was that even possible? Following a trace in reverse?

Hisoka turns to her with a small, almost amused smile, raising an eyebrow. "...Yes?"

Yuri stares at her, incredulous but deeply impressed. She supposes it makes sense– time extends in both directions from the present, after all. She just never considered using her abilities to follow a trace *backwards*.

It would seem Hisoka has more to teach her.

Yuri knows *exactly* what she wants to do on their next Shadowreading case.

"You never taught me how to follow a trace backwards. Did Mrs. Mikomori teach you?"

"Not exactly," Hisoka titters, her smile turning sheepish but also a bit coy at Yuri's wonder and excitement. "She shared a lifetime's worth of experience and wisdom with me and helped me establish the foundation for tuning into my Shadowreading, but there was a lot, particularly about the supernatural, that she was hesitant to teach me. So, I did my own research and experimented with what I could do, and eventually worked out how myself. It's

a lot harder to follow shadows against the natural flow of time, and it's only possible if the impression is really strong. I'm sorry that I never mentioned it, I just... assumed, after everything, that you already figured out how without me..."

Yuri shakes her head, eyeing her love proudly. So brilliant and resourceful.

And stubborn.

Hisoka's mentor was reluctant to impart certain forbidden knowledge upon her because of the possible danger it could pose, so she went and figured it out on her own. This rebellious side of her is *deeply* attractive. The longer she stares, openly affectionate again, the pinker the tips of Hisoka's ears turn.

Hisoka narrows her eyes. *Stop that.*

Yuri's grin grows. *Never.*

"I don't mind doing a little extra footwork if it means you aren't overextending your abilities," Miu interrupts their silent banter with an eye roll, a look on her face that clearly tells them *you two are doing it again*. The expression fades, shifting back to something more sincere. "Like I said, I don't want you hurt."

Hisoka nods, turning a soft look towards Miu before setting her focus back on their task once more. Dropping her hold on Yuri's hand, she cups the hair ornament between both of her palms, feeling for the traces of its previous owners– Miku's, in particular. Her expression is so serious: her lips are just barely parted, and her eyes are shining with determination, staring off into the air not quite distantly but deep in concentration.

It's a look Yuri is very familiar with. She sees it frequently, especially on cases, anytime Hisoka is reading the shadows hidden in the world of the living around them. Regardless of how cute she finds it, however, Hisoka's particular manner of Shadowreading brings to light a tiny flaw in her plan to help Hisoka with this endeavor, to work in tandem with her as a team.

She's reluctant to break Hisoka's concentration, but...

"It's strange," Hisoka mumbles, oblivious to Yuri's fidgeting beside her. "I can sense Miku's echoes here through the shadows on the token, but there's also something else. I think someone else's echoes are somehow tethered to it here too. Your mother said this pin has been in the Hinasaki family for a long time, right? It doesn't seem possible, but I wonder if maybe–"

She cuts off abruptly with a small squeak, her whole body jolting as Yuri's palm comes to rest on her hip. Focus lost, she looks back at her over her shoulder, a look of fluster and confusion on her face.

"You use both hands to read tokens," Yuri argues, fighting the urge to awkwardly scrunch up her shoulders. "I have to be touching you if I'm going to help..."

Hisoka stares for a moment longer before making another small, grumbly, embarrassed noise. She doesn't object further. Instead, she reaches out again, searching for the stream.

Yuri follows her as she moves, remaining steadfastly at her side as they investigate the backyard. The trace eventually leads them to the ominous well. Hisoka comes to a stop in front of it with a deep frown.

Picking up on the echoes churning beneath the well's lid again, Yuri mirrors Hisoka's anxious grimace. Her hand unconsciously clutches her hip a little harder. She has a bad feeling about the stream these shadows are going to reveal.

"Yuri..." Hisoka whispers, keeping her gaze fixed on the well. "There's something here."

"Mhmm," Yuri mumbles, still eyeing the well warily. "Are you ready?"

Hisoka glances back at Miu and Mio, who nod in return. Then she nods as well, unconsciously leaning back a little further in Yuri.

Yuri begins to focus, helping Hisoka tune into the shadows. As they're finding their bearings, the echo doesn't quite feel right, as if somehow it's been spliced, two memories overlapping. They dive in anyway and see–

A little girl in a bright kimono ducking down behind the well. She's giggling softly as if she's playing a game. She seems to be hiding from someone, perhaps engaged in a round of hide and seek.

As she hides, waiting for her seeker, the lid to the well seems to shift. It's moving on its own, gradually opening bit by bit. The tiny girl doesn't notice. She's too caught up in the game, peeking around the well towards the mansion and waiting for someone to find her.

The dread starts to build in both Yuri and Hisoka, sinking in the pit of their stomachs. To their horror an unnaturally elongated arm begins to emerge from the depth, first one, then another, stretched and emaciated to a sickening degree.

It's the violent shadow from the rectangular corridor. Yuri is certain of it.

Before they can react, the arms suddenly grasp out, reaching for and latching on to the little girl with vicious speed. Her screams echo up the well as she and the spirit disappear inside.

There's a splash at the bottom. Then everything goes silent.

Yuri feels nauseous. She can tell the others do too, tears building in all of their eyes. Hisoka is fighting valiantly not to turn away to hide her arms again. Yuri holds onto her more tightly anyway, offering her warmth and strength.

The memory flashes, shifting and changing. The trees and underbrush grow uncontrollably, unruly and unkempt. The stones of the well and the wood of the fence behind it rapidly deteriorate, weathered by nature and the ever-onward march of the moon. Time passes. Days, months, years, decades.

Another flash corresponds with the clash of a familiar shutter.

Miku is under attack once more.

"Mikoto!" The mangled spirit of the little girl is berating Miku, grasping at her with as much fury as her tiny frame can hold. Her face is torn up on one side, and her bright kimono is dingy and shredded. It looks as if she was dragged down the side of the well all the way down; she must have died in horrible pain. "You were supposed to come find me! Why didn't you hurry?!"

Miku frantically shakes her head, clearly reluctant to use the Camera Obscura against such a young child, hostile spirit or not. "I'm not...! I don't know what you're...!"

The little girl lunges. Miku reflexively takes a photo. The flash engulfs the girl, causing her to cry out.

The echo burns white.

The battle is over. The little spirit shrinks into a ball of bright flame. Another soul is absorbed by the camera.

Miku's eyes are filled with tears when the fiery light fades. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..."

She seems to be trying her best to hold herself together, but she's tired, shaken, and scared. She scrubs at her eyes and breathes deeply, trying to steady herself.

Then, she keeps moving–

The echo ends. The gentle sunshine melts it away.

The girls all remain quiet for a moment. Only the heavy sounds of their breathing and the soft breeze in the trees fill the silence. Such heavy echoes. So much senseless suffering.

It truly never gets easier.

Miu has a dark scowl on her face but tears in her eyes again. She swipes at them almost angrily as she turns to Hisoka. "Was that the right stream? Can you follow it backwards from here?"

Hisoka is visibly distressed, tears bright in her eyes too. She keeps her head held high, refusing to shrink down or turn away from such gut-wrenching tragedy, not again. Even still, she eases back again a little more firmly into Yuri, subtly seeking her comfort. She nods before motioning towards the mansion. "It's definitely the right stream. It came from back that way…"

They start back on Miku's trail.

As they're returning into the depths of the mansion, Miu and Mio watch Hisoka as she works, following the trace to its point of origin– and subsequently, Yuri as she's holding Hisoka

steady. Their first task is to cross back through the eerie fishtank room, carefully traversing the makeshift bridges single file.

This time, Yuri leads the way. She's walking backwards, muttering to Hisoka under her breath, completely unfazed by the danger she's putting herself in as long as she can make sure Hisoka is safe. Hisoka is watching their footing to keep them from tumbling down into the stagnant water, while Yuri is watching her, keeping a hold of her to keep her balanced.

"Careful... Careful..."

"Yuri..." Hisoka huffs, rolling her eyes. She's whispering fondly, nearly giggling at her love's overly protective antics but also giving her a lightly scolding look. "I'm fine. I'm just feeling for the echoes right now, they're not obstructing my vision. You don't have to worry about me. You're going to fall in if you're not careful..."

Yuri stares for a moment, scrunching her brow. Then she makes a grumbly, worried noise of her own and continues to fuss, much to Hisoka's amused exasperation.

Mio and Miu both just chuckle behind them.

"Hisoka… you said you've been doing this for a long time?" Mio crosses the first wooden board behind them, watching over the two as she arrives gracefully on the other side. It's a question, not a statement; she wants to know what Rei's little girl had been up to in all their time apart.

Hisoka glances back at her again as she's just about reached the second platform. Yuri quietly whines at her for turning her attention away but reluctantly settles with a huff when Hisoka sets her eyes back on her, tittering under her breath. They both have their feet on solid ground when Hisoka finally answers. "I started training as a teenager. My mentor always warned me against chasing the shadows of people." She winces before continuing, "Particularly the ones on our mountain. I was strictly forbidden from it when I was still in her care. Afterwards though, when I became an adult and started reading shadows on my own, I found it harder in practice to turn away..."

"And she kept getting hurt because of it." Miu sighs, looking over at Hisoka affectionately as well. They've all nearly made it across the room. "How many times did you tell yourself that you were going to stop?"

Hisoka pouts, but her expression is also somewhat sheepish. "Too many. But I don't regret it. I'm glad I never did."

Her eyes soften when they return to meet Yuri's. They finish crossing the final bridge together, arriving safely on the other side. Yuri gives her a tiny, crooked grin of encouragement, squeezing her hip where she's still holding her steady. Hisoka returns it smittenly and then steps forward with confidence, leading the way through the next passageway.

Following Hisoka as she follows the token's trace upstream, they make their way back to the atrium with the cherry blossom tree. They travel slowly along the porch until they finally

come to a stop in front of their destination.

Hisoka looks back at Yuri and Mio with an apologetic grimace.

Yuri and Mio share an uneasy look. Reluctantly eyeing the gaping threshold to the creepy doll room, they silently agree to enter first, insistent on protecting Miu and Hisoka.

Yuri gets a grumpy look on her face and clings to Hisoka– much to Hisoka's chagrin. Hisoka sighs, shaking her head, but allows it without further protest.

Mio turns to Miu, reaching back for her hand. "Stay close, okay? Don't let go of my hand."

Miu chuckles, a teasing glint shining in her eyes. "I should be telling you that. I'm the one with the spirit flashlight, remember? Don't worry, I'll protect you."

Mio's confidence falters, falling to something subdued. Miu's playful smirk wavers. Sensing the downward shift in her demeanor, she takes Mio's hand and holds on tight.

They all enter the doll room together, stepping over the fallen door and mindfully avoiding the gaping hole in the floor where the tatami mats have been removed. As Hisoka uses her abilities and the token to pinpoint the very beginning of the next trace in Miku's harrowing experience here, leaning back against Yuri as she focuses, Miu talks softly with a crestfallen Mio.

Her whispers are only intended to reach Mio's ears, but Yuri and Hisoka just barely catch them anyway.

"Mio, it's okay. I know I'm safe with you. I was just teasing..."

"I know, it's just I..." Mio sighs, refusing to look Miu in the eyes. "I'm really trying to watch out for you three, like your mom always used to look out for me, but I...I can't even..."

"It's okay, we understand," Miu soothes, still trying to catch her gaze. "The spirit flashlight is a little different from the Camera Obscuras. Do you want to try it instead?"

Mio tenses, looking deeply anxious but frustrated by her own anxiety. "I– I don't know, I..."

"Miu," Hisoka interrupts gently, keeping her gaze fixed on the center of the room. Through her own sixth sense and her grip on her hip, Yuri can tell that Hisoka has finally located the exact point at which the stream originated. "It's here."

Miu nods and then looks back at Mio, making sure she's ready. Mio seems grateful for the temporary change in subject. Renewing her resolve, she nods in return.

Yuri adjusts her hold on Hisoka, this time winding both arms around her waist from behind to hold her steady. Fully concentrated on the shadow, Hisoka unconsciously wriggles backwards until she's firmly and comfortably pressed flush against her. Then, together, they dive in once again and see–

Miku lying on the tatami. She's unconscious but thankfully uninjured. There is no clear indication of how she got here. It's as if she just appeared, spirited away only to be deposited in the room with the spirit camera.

She's not alone.

The spirits of several children surround her. They're all silently staring down, waiting. Three of them stand out amongst the group, their attire distinct from the others– the little girl from the well included.

Slowly, Miku begins to stir.

The children suddenly scatter.

Miku jolts awake, startling at the sound of running feet and quiet voices urging her to find them. She blinks, breathing heavily, staring after them as the doors all slam shut in their wake.

Then, wincing as if something aches, she turns her gaze down.

Phantom ropes are wound around her wrists, digging deep burns into her skin. As soon as she catches sight of them, they dissolve like mist, fading from view.

The marks, however, remain.

Miku gasps sharply as she examines them. In the present, they all do the same. The rope curse. The same one that violently murdered the novelist's team. Miku is now afflicted by it too.

Something catches Miku's eye, pulling her attention elsewhere: a bright flash shining in the low light. She turns towards it to find the mirror shard, the piece she just obtained, held delicately in the hands of a young boy– one of the three distinct children.

His eyes are pitch black. Darkness drips down his cheeks like tainted tears.

"That mirror–!" Miku stutters out, reaching out for him. He smiles mischievously and then, slowly, begins to disappear. "Give it back!"

But the little spirit is already gone, taking the shard with him, and–

Yuri blinks, shaking her head as color returns to the world.

Where Miku's echo had been lies the large hole in the floor. It's clearly been there for a very long time– far longer than Miku's vestige here feels. It was absent in the memory. The tatami had been repaired, seeming to be brand new.

Yuri scrunches her brow, holding onto Hisoka a little tighter. That's odd. Was that echo distorted too? It doesn't make sense. Miku had been right there, physically lying on the tatami. If it hadn't actually been there, then–

"Yuri?" Hisoka glances back at her. "Are you okay...?"

"Oh, sorry," Yuri quickly mutters, loosening her grip but not letting go. She keeps her confusion to herself.

"That mirror..." Miu mutters, unintentionally echoing her mother's words. Her hand has found its way back to her heart. She looks really worried. "She's got to get it back. She must have. It's the only way she could have survived."

"What is it?" Hisoka frowns, concerned by her worry. "Some sort of spiritual artifact?"

"It's a piece of the Holy Mirror, supposedly blessed with the Five Gods' protection. Dr. Asou wrote about it in one of the manuscripts I found in the attic..." Miu trails off, thumbing through the research in her bag again somewhat awkwardly. She promised not to let go of Mio's hand, so her other hand remains occupied. "It was supposedly used to prevent the Hell Gate from opening, but it shattered, and–"

"How much of your mother's research have you gone through?" Mio interrupts her search, peeking around at the bag curiously.

Miu falls still, abandoning her search. She swallows and then shrugs. She looks a bit wary, as if she's trying not to react defensively. "A bit. I didn't mean to be nosy. I had just felt something above my room, something that was really heavy with emotions. When I went to find out what it was, I found all the rest and got curious..."

Mio blinks, impressed. "You could sense all this from that far away? Through the ceiling?"

Miu shifts uncomfortably. She starts to ramble a bit, trying to justify herself. "Well, I mean... Sort of, I guess. Everything has something attached to it, emotions or memories. Usually we have to be touching or at least somewhat close to pick up on them. What I felt in the attic was really powerful, enough that I could feel it from down below. It wasn't the research I was picking up on though, it was...something else..."

She glances at Hisoka out of the corner of her eye. Hisoka's shoulders fall, and she looks away. Yuri pulls her closer, just as she had the night they found out about the adoption papers from Miu.

It was a hard night.

Hisoka had been overwhelmed, lost in a storm of emotions that she kept neatly hidden away until they were finally alone. She was elated and relieved at the confirmation of what she knew in her heart all along– Rei wanted her, she always wanted her– but also crushed that everything fell apart before Rei could actually save her from the hell she was living in. Knowing how viscerally it hurt Rei, enough to leave powerful echoes that lasted nearly decades, only exacerbated the ache.

"I see..." Mio's small smile looks pained. She seems to understand what Miu stumbled upon in the attic too. She's been there for Rei for a very long time. She was likely there when Rei hid the papers away, casting them as far away from herself as she reasonably could.

A sad silence falls over them for a brief moment. Uncomfortable with the source, Hisoka tries to brush it off, distracting from it by changing the subject.

"The spirit of the little boy who took the mirror... His echo doesn't feel as recent as those left behind by the novelist's team, but they also don't feel quite as old as the woman in the white kimono or the little girl helping Miku. He must have crossed over sometime in between, along with that little girl from the well. They must have arrived here around the same timeframe."

"Makes sense. How can you tell?" Mio asks, her interest clearly piqued. She offers another encouraging smile, attempting to restore Hisoka's confidence. "You can sense that from an echo too?"

Her encouragement works.

"Yes, to some extent," Hisoka nods. "The closer to the present an echo is left behind, the stronger it feels and the easier it is to read. Time hasn't diminished its clarity yet." She perks back up, her eyes brightening with excitement. "The kimonos they were wearing were pretty telling too. They're clearly from two different eras."

Yuri tilts her head, eyes bright too but with affection instead. She loves seeing Hisoka's excitement. She gives her a look, silently pleading for her to continue, to reveal what she knows if only so she can relish in it a little longer.

Hisoka beams, indulging her. "Well, during the Edo period, there were sumptuary laws prohibiting the average citizen from wearing certain colors and styles. Kimonos then were made of silk and often worn in layers and commonly featured less intricate designs since the use of purple and red fabric, gold embroidery, and dyed shibori were all among what was prohibited. The laws were abolished during the Meiji era though, when the borders were opened to Western trading and new materials and techniques became available, revolutionizing fashion all across the country. The woman and the little girl in white likely lived in the Edo period, but based on their clothes, the other children– or at least that particular little boy and the two girls– must have lived sometime after that. If I had to guess...maybe one hundred years ago or so."

"An easy way to tell would be to look at the lining," Miu adds, nodding along in agreement with Hisoka. "Safflower dye was practically a staple pre-1960 and makes almost every kimono made in that era glaringly obvious. Of course...our psychic visions don't come in technicolor. The patterns are still pretty telling though. They must have crossed over after the curse was unleashed but long before my mom ever arrived..."

The other three stare at her in surprise.

She scowls in return.

"What? I know things too."

"We know," Mio chuckles softly, trying to soothe her defensiveness. "It's just impressive how much you both know."

"It's *fashion,*" Miu huffs. "It's kind of my thing. I've done a few historical photo shoots, and one of my first acting roles was in a period drama." Then, slowly, her grumpy look begins to soften. She starts to relax, her defensiveness falling away as she takes in their sincerity, their genuine interest in what she knows and has to say. She glances over at Hisoka, who looks back curiously. What starts as a tiny fond smile turns into a mischievous but still deeply affectionate grin. "And Hisoka knows because she knows antiques and history better than anyone. Honestly, she's kind of a giant nerd..."

"Wha– a nerd?" Hisoka furrows her brow at her, mildly affronted. "I'm not a nerd. You knew just as much about it as I do."

"Again, because I'm an idol. It's literally in my job description." Miu waves her hand as if it's nothing worth mentioning. "You actually enjoy collecting weird, old stuff and staying up all night poring over your history books and folklore."

"I haven't done that for a long time, not since Yuri moved in! And they're... They're not weird..." Hisoka's voice slowly falls to a quiet grumble. She's definitely pouting again. "They're interesting and unique..."

Miu giggles. She looks like she wants to make a cheeky comment on Hisoka's self-proclaimed change in study habits– or really the reason behind the change, standing right beside her. Out of affection, she spares her… *this time*. She's still teasing, but her tone is so light and warm. "You have seventeen clocks in your house."

"*No*," Hisoka defends, growing more annoyed. "I sold some of them recently." Then she narrows her eyes, unimpressed. "Why are you counting?"

Silently looking between the two as they bicker, Yuri frowns deeply. With the bracelet on, it's harder to tell if they're actually fighting or not. Should she step in? Miu isn't teasing maliciously, but it's getting under Hisoka's skin regardless, getting her increasingly worked up. She doesn't want them to fight, especially not here, in the middle of this mansion where the echoes hanging over their heads still pose a serious threat...

Sensing her worry, Mio catches her gaze. She leans in close while the two girls are distracted, whispering just loudly enough for Yuri to hear, "It's okay. This is just what sisters do." Then, raising her voice enough for the girls to hear her, she interrupts their squabbling. "Alright, you two. I'd rather not linger in this room if we can help it. Where did Miku go next?"

Miu and Hisoka both stop mid-bicker, turning towards the sound of her voice. They share one more brief look and then nod resolutely.

Cupping her hands around the Hinasaki hairpin again, Hisoka braces herself, steadying her mind and senses to return to the echoes around them. Before she can set her concentration too deep, Miu gently sets a hand on top of hers, pulling her attention back to her.

"I like that you're a nerd," Miu whispers, offering a crooked but proud grin. "I think it's cool."

Hisoka stares in surprise, trying to decide if she's serious or still teasing. Her expression slowly softens as Miu beams up at her. She must sense that Miu is being sincere through her touch– something Miu likely did intentionally. Even still, she quietly huffs, averting her gaze again and slowly turning red.

Miu chuckles and steps back to stand beside Mio, giving her space to focus on following the trace.

They finally set back into motion, following Hisoka while she follows Miku's trace. Yuri keeps a hand on her hip, trying not to make them walk awkwardly but also trying to stay as close as possible.

As they step out of the room, she whispers to Hisoka as well, unwittingly looking up at her like she hung the moon and stars– as she's often known to do.

"Don't worry. I like your nerdiness too. I think it's cute. And we like the same things, so I guess that makes me a nerd too."

Hisoka's focus snaps. Her steps stutter. She falls still. Slowly turning an even darker red, she remains silent, still pretending to be focused but eyeing Yuri out of the corner of her gaze.

Her eyes flicker to Yuri's lips.

She's clearly resisting the urge to kiss her.

Yuri grins, biting her lip. The impulse to lean in and give her what she wants is overwhelming.

Hisoka must sense that she's close to giving in. She quickly looks away. Clearing her throat, she leads them forward.

Yuri tries not to pout. She keeps pace, renewing her resolve as well.

"Mio..." Behind them, Miu tugs on the older girl as they backtrack down the porch. "Here." She holds out the spirit flashlight for Mio to take. "Just try it for a little bit, okay? I'll take it back if it becomes too much."

Mio swallows roughly, looking a little nauseous. Her hand is shaking, but she carefully accepts the light, wielding it bravely despite her reservations. She examines it as they walk, running her thumb over the switch and the familiar markings etched into its surface.

Hisoka leads them back towards the center of the porch but then slows as she reaches the corner just before the steps. "It feels like she went to the backyard from here. She must have faced the spirit of the little girl in the well and then doubled back..."

She suddenly tenses and cuts off. All of the fine hairs on the back of Yuri's neck stand on end. Hisoka glances at her and then back towards the burial room, bracing for the shadow that's set her on edge. Yuri adjusts her hold on her waist, bracing herself as well, before nodding back to Miu.

Miu immediately understands.

Reaching into the shadows, they all start to cast out, then they see–

Miku walking down the porch, following the same path they are taking.

Her steps falter. She stops, slowly glancing back over her shoulder. Something dangerous and dark is stumbling in the shadows behind her.

"Where?...Where?"

The spirit keeps her head down. Her hand is clutching at her face as if she's in an unfathomable amount of pain. She's staggering along the porch, phasing partially through the walls, the lattice, and the railing, blindly fumbling for something out of reach.

She finally moves her hand. They all fight not to gasp.

The spirit's eyes have been brutally gouged out. Black blood drips down her face from empty sockets, barely concealed beneath a completely saturated cloth. Miku freezes at the sight, holding her breath, careful not to make any noise. They all freeze with her. The only sound for a moment is the light whispering of the wind through the cherry blossom tree and the distant ticking of the ever-revolving waterwheel.

Miku braves another step back.

The floorboard creaks beneath her foot.

The blinded spirit's head snaps up, turning to face the sound. Without warning, she lunges towards them, hands outstretched and clawing at the air.

They all yelp and flinch away.

Mio pushes the girls behind her, stepping in front of them without thinking. Aiming the flashlight, she instinctively discharges it at the echo of the spirit.

The flash cuts through the grey, dissolving it like smoke, and then–

The memory abruptly ends.

They remain frozen again anyway, breathing heavily with adrenaline as it slowly fades from their systems.

The vision they saw was just an echo. It happened in the past. It still felt entirely too real. It's hard to remember that they're not actually in any physical danger when they're caught up in the midst of them.

Mio remains stiff, holding her body protectively in front of them. Her eyes remain searching, wide and staring distantly. Quietly watching her, Miu lets out a soundless sigh. She winds her arm through Mio's, offering her comfort.

Mio's hand finds Miu's on her arm, coming to gently rest on top of it. When she looks down though, she twitches before glancing back over her shoulder, an expression on her face as if she were expecting to see someone else. She blinks down at Miu, her mind coming back to the present. Slowly, she starts to relax.

Miu offers a small smile, beaming at her proudly. "See? You did it."

Mio lets out something between a humorless laugh and an embarrassed huff. She's blushing slightly but gives Miu a wry smile in return.

"Do you want me to take it back?" Miu offers sincerely, glancing down at the spirit flashlight. She cares about Mio. She doesn't want to push too hard.

Staring down at the flashlight, Mio considers it for a moment. She eventually shakes her head. "It's…not the camera. I'll hold onto it for now. Maybe I can actually be useful for once…"

All three girls frown at her.

"Mio..." Hisoka gently scolds, sounding a lot like Rei. "You're always useful."

"You stayed by Mama's side for years, helping her find my mom..." Miu sounds like she's trying not to get frustrated with Mio's self-deprecation. She's struggling. She's just as protective– but also just as bad. She doesn't want to sound like a hypocrite.

Mio just shakes her head, avoiding their gazes. She motions to the hairpin in Hisoka's hand. Miu and Hisoka sigh again. A battle for another time, perhaps.

Reading the shadows, Hisoka's eyes track Miku's vestige as it moves through the atrium. More back and forth, more backtracking, more wandering lost in darkness. "It looks like she stopped by the area with the waterwheel on the way back from the yard. Then..." She glances back over her shoulder. "She headed back towards the room with the candles– the burial room."

"Alright then," Mio nods. "I'll light the way."

***

The long corridor Miku's echo takes them down is dark and eerie, like the rest of the mansion, but unfathomably more so.

They veered off from the mansion proper, slipping through the tucked-away door in the back of the burial room and passing through a room filled with rubble. The darkness is intense, almost palpable as they push through, trudging deeper and deeper down the unknown passageway and into the very bowels of the Himuro Mansion.

They're heading towards the source of the darkness. Yuri can feel the fading echoes intensifying, becoming more dangerous with each step they take.

Like the door in the fishtank room that led to the backyard, the door to the corridor bore strange markings and what looked to be the family's crest. The mechanism almost looked as if it once functioned as some type of lock but has long since been shattered and left inoperable.

Thankfully, the doors opened for them regardless.

As they carefully proceed with only the spirit flashlight to light the way, Miu fills them in on the info she'd gathered from Rei's research– in particular, about the blinded ghost that attacked Miku in the atrium. "Sealing the Hell Gate involved a secondary ritual, separate from the primary Strangling Ritual. It was referred to as the Demon Tag Ritual and was performed every ten years to select the child that would become the next sacrifice."

She's reading aloud from an old journal that appears to be written in that same familiar handwriting. Possibly Rei's. Possibly someone else's, someone close to them. She's holding it with one hand and Mio's hand in the other.

"On the twenty-sixth day of the eleventh month," she continues, squinting in the darkness at the somewhat messy scrawl to make sure she's reading it correctly, "girls above the age of seven years, nine months, and twenty-five days were all gathered at the mansion. The ritual was carried out like a typical game of Demon Tag, except the 'demon' was literally blinded by a particular mask– one with stakes through the eyes to carry out the blinding. The first child caught, thought to have the weakest psychic abilities, would become the next 'Blinded Maiden.' The last, thought to have the strongest psychic abilities, would become the next Rope Shrine Maiden."

"So, that ghost that attacked your mom then..." Mio is holding the flashlight steady so that Miu can read the journal, keeping it angled so that it lights both the page and the way forward. Her frown is grave as she glances back at Miu. She seems saddened but completely unsurprised by the revelation.

Miu nods, her own expression grim. "She must have been the final Blinded Maiden."

Dividing her attention between the conversation behind her and supporting Hisoka as they wade through the shadows, Yuri tries to bite down on her frustration. It slips out anyway in the form of a low growl. They don't question her. They all feel it too. They're all disgusted that innocent children are constantly paying the price for these vicious rituals.

The end of the corridor holds yet another door with the same intricate locking mechanism. Like the others, it's completely destroyed, allowing them passage without further strain or struggle. Yuri swallows roughly, her fingers unwittingly clutching a little tighter on Hisoka's hip. The darkness beyond is so concentrated; it's almost dense enough to breathe.

The source lies somewhere just ahead.

Steadying themselves, they all push through the doors together.

The area before them almost feels like the beginnings of a vast cave system. A walkway lines the edges of a deep pit, dropping at least two stories down from the platform they're standing

on, with a half level in between connecting the upper layer to the lower layer. The wooden structures, the ladders and the walkways, are old– extraordinarily so, likely predating the mansion itself. Several large stones protrude from the ground in the very center of the deepest level. They look like giant claws tearing their way up through the earth from somewhere deep at its core.

"It looks like we can get down over there." Mio motions towards a ladder leading down to the lower level.

Miu grimaces, peeking over the edge of the upper walkway. "Do we want to?"

"If we still want to find out what happened here, then yes, unfortunately we do..." Hisoka is staring down over the edge too, her eyes fixed on a large set of doors looming in the shadows. The stone they're composed of is covered in odd markings, similar to the ones they've been seeing all over the mansion. She doesn't seem happy about descending either but knows it's the only way to continue tracking the trace.

Miu sighs. She knows she's right.

They take the rickety ladders one at a time, taking turns holding the flashlight and helping each other climb down. The temperature around them seems to plummet with each layer they descend, the air around them unnaturally cold and damp. When all of their feet are back on the solid ground at the bottom, they regroup and move towards the huge door together, watching each other's backs all along the way.

"Careful," Hisoka warns, her voice quiet but loud in the deafening silence. "The shadows here are really deep. Reading them could potentially be really dangerous, especially if it happens unintentionally. Don't drop your guard..."

"Noted. Let's not wait around for them to overwhelm us then." Mio shines the spirit flashlight on the claw-like rocks as they step around them. They're wound in more ceremonial ropes, all tinted in rusted crimson. "It looks like some sort of ritual took place here."

"Demon Tag..." Miu is staring up at the great stone doors in front of them, eyeing them apprehensively. It's clearly a gate of some sort. It's not quite the Hell Gate, not yet, but they're definitely getting closer. Whether this gate was built to keep something out or keep something in is yet to be decided. "The writings said that the Demon Tag ritual took place somewhere called the 'Demon Mouth.'"

"An apt name, I guess." Mio mutters before turning to check on Hisoka and Yuri. "Did you two find something?"

Hisoka hums in confirmation, warily eyeing a strange section of the wall just beside the giant gate. Two slots run deeply into the cave wall, both radiating intense shadows– more condensed memories stacked on top of each other. Yuri noticed it first and tugged her over to it. Now they're examining it together. "Perhaps some sort of keyholes?"

"That would make sense." Miu turns away from the door, moving with Mio to stand beside Yuri and Hisoka. Mio points the flashlight at the space to give them a better view, and they all

examine the odd punctures together. "They had to have some sort of mechanism to open doors this size. What could have fit there? Two keys? They wouldn't really be shaped like keys though, these holes look kind of like...stakes..." She trails off, a look of discomfort and realization slowly spreading across her face. She glances at Yuri out of the corner of her eye. "Have you already read the echoes here?"

Yuri shakes her head. She and Hisoka are grimacing as well; they've reached the same conclusion, recalling what Miu said about a "blinding ritual."

Miu sighs again before turning to Mio. Mio has a look on her face as if she's already realized what's going on too. She reaches her hand out to Miu before Miu can even say anything.

"Ready?"

Miu nods and takes her hand.

Focusing intently on just the two holes in the wall, they approach the echoes slowly and carefully, wary of being overwhelmed. Once they've found their footing, they block out everything else around them, reaching towards it to see–

Bright flashes and blinding darkness, violent rituals and pouring blood, unnerving chanting and piercing screams. Centuries of agony and fear.

The echoes are just as Hisoka had warned but even worse than they could have ever imagined.

They all grit their teeth as they brace against them, holding on to find what they need to see. Vestiges of people move frantically around them, shadows and shades. The great doors open and close, shaking the room as they grind heavily on their hinges. Each time they open, the echoes grow heavier, denser, drawing them in closer to the epicenter of the darkness that lies beyond.

Various silhouettes stand at the keyholes, shifting in shape and size as the echo changes and distorts in front of their eyes. There's something drenched in blood and malice in each shadow's hands, something that fits perfectly in the holes.

The echo is moving too fast, it's too dark for them to make out what it is–

"Miu!" Yuri calls over the roaring din of the compacted echoes ringing in her ears, reaching out for her. Miu understands without needing to ask. Tugging Mio even closer to Yuri and Hisoka, she grabs Yuri's wrist.

The moment they touch, Yuri feels the flare of Miu's spark combining with both hers and Hisoka's. There's something else too, something she's never felt before– something gentle but indescribably powerful. It's rippling around them in waves, fluttering like the wings of a butterfly. It's too dangerous to stop and find out what it is. All Yuri knows is that it's trying to help.

With Miu's focus, Hisoka's light, and Yuri's raw strength, currently distilled and refined by the amulet, combining with the mysterious power fluttering and flashing in glowing shades of red, the echoes slow in time to a crawl, brightening and flickering with sudden clarity. The vestiges are finally revealed. Three figures stand out in particular, shifting and metamorphosizing between each other as they approach the slots: a tall, imposing man bearing the mask of an angry demon, a wise-looking middle-aged man wearing a plain kimono, and Miku.

In each of their hands, the one invariable constant, is a mask, a terrible thing with long, bloodied stakes piercing through the eyes–

The key.

Each vestige raises the mask, carefully sliding it into its place in the wall. The gate begins to open again.

Malice spills out.

It's violent and furious, brimming with hate and suffering. It starts to encompass them, filling their minds like black water and miasma, trying to drown them, trying to break them, trying to drag them beneath, and then–

Yuri's entire vision flares red.

The mysterious power breaks the echo's hold. It's shielding them, pulling them forward in time, back to the surface, leaving the malice behind, and then–

The echo breaks. They emerge, standing shaken but together in the quiet darkness of the present.

The imprint of a butterfly is slowly fading behind Yuri's eyes as she steadies herself. That power. It definitely didn't come from Hisoka or Miu– she's very familiar with what their abilities feel like. That was something entirely different.

A crimson butterfly…

She glances over at Mio. Mio stands beside them, rubbing at her eye with a deep frown. Could that power have come from her? She seems just as unsteady as they are. Or possibly...

Could it have been the spirit inside of her?

"*That's* the key?" Miu growls as she's steadying herself, still clinging to Yuri's arm. "They must have used it to... That poor woman..."

Hisoka is panting softly, trying to subdue a wave of nausea left by the intensity of the echoes. She turns and buries her face against Yuri's neck again.

Yuri supports them both with little effort, looking between them empathetically. She's not unaffected, she's still weary and disoriented, but the bracelet definitely takes off the biting edge.

"How could she have possibly survived that?" Miu is still shaking in distress and frustration. She straightens up, releasing Yuri to allow her to focus on comforting Hisoka. Before she can fully pull away, Yuri reaches back for her and squeezes her hand, silently reminding her that she's still right there if she needs her. Miu's small smile in return is sincere in its gratitude but still strained. She waves Yuri off before turning to Mio, who still hasn't let go of her other hand. "You saw, right? Those stakes..."

Mio nods, her deep frown still firmly in place. "Chances are she probably didn't. All that mattered was that she survived long enough to complete the ritual. Once it was over, she wasn't needed. I'd like to think they took care of these 'blinded maidens' once they got what they wanted, but knowing history and these rituals' penchant for wanton cruelty..."

Miu lets out another frustrated growl. Stepping forward, she pushes herself into Mio's arms, seeking comfort somewhat forcibly. Mio blinks in surprise but readily offers it, holding her tightly until the feelings aren't so sharp and overwhelming.

Watching them as she's holding Hisoka, Yuri sighs, almost chuckling softly despite everything. She knows very well Miu's sometimes aggressive way of asking for comfort– it's sweet to see that Mio is giving it to her without hesitation.

Then the hairs on the back of her neck are standing on end, and she's reminded once more where they stand. Miu quietly gasps, lifting her head as she senses the darkness too.

They all step back, huddling close together as the world falls right back to grey, and they see–

Miku standing still, turning silently in place with the camera raised. Something is moving in the darkness with her, shifting between the claws rising from the earth.

It disappears from view.

It reappears right in front of her.

Miku holds her breath. The blinded maiden's grasping hands are inches from her face. She waits, remaining perfectly still.

"There's no one here..."

The maiden turns and then starts to fumble away, whimpering softly in pain. She vanishes, fading into the darkness once more. Miku slowly, quietly exhales but doesn't drop her guard, and–

They all exhale with her.

"So," Miu starts after a long moment, pressing a hand to her heart to steady it. She glances back at Hisoka. "Back up the ladders?"

Hisoka looks down at the hair ornament. Then she lifts her gaze, letting it wander through the shadows, following the unseen stream. She glances back at Miu. "Mhmm."

Miu sighs. "Great.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, what do you know. It appears our crimson butterfly is still around looking out for her sister and the little ones, after all.

;)

Thanks for reading! Stay tuned!

Chapter 5: Demon Tag pt.2

Chapter Notes

Lots more echoes to read here! Demon Tag really is a busy chapter...

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Returning back the way they came, they pick up the trace in the burial room.

An echo hangs in the air in front of the smaller altar, patiently waiting to be read. As per their new arrangement, Hisoka tugs on Yuri, who then glances over at Miu. Miu meets her gaze and nods once she's certain she and Mio are ready. Then, reaching out together, they all breach the surface of the shadows and see–

The young girl in the white kimono standing in front of Miku, adamantly pointing towards the small altar.

Stepping forward to oblige, Miku warily examines the red and white candles, all lined up in a neat row across the table. She stares for a moment and then turns back to ask the young spirit what she's meant to be doing with them.

The little girl has already vanished, leaving her to solve the mystery alone.

Miku sighs tiredly.

Sensing an aura over the candles, she takes a psychic exposé, allowing the spirit camera to reveal the solution. Then, with the old box of matches she's had tucked in her palm, she patiently lights the red candles, one at a time.

It's a little more difficult than expected– the candles seem to go out and reignite randomly, as if some external force is controlling the flames– but when the red ones are successfully lit, all of the candles ignite and flare brightly, causing Miku to gasp and stumble backwards. Something in the altar clicks. The little doors on it slowly open. What appears to be some sort of decorative scroll rests neatly inside.

"Really? The candles were some sort of supernatural puzzle?" Miu almost sounds exasperated, as if she can't believe an antiquated locking mechanism could require such a fictitious-sounding method of unlocking. "How…?"

Recalling her experiences on Mt. Hikami, Yuri starts to point out that by lighting the candles in a particular order, Miku likely appeased a spirit, one that must have been holding the altar

closed to keep its secret hidden inside. She cuts off before she can, sensing something appearing behind them.

Miu senses it too. She narrows her eyes in annoyance as the blinded spirit appears once more, arms outstretched and grasping. "Again?"

"She's definitely persistent..." Mio mutters, watching the spirit closing the distance to Miku with a grimace.

The echo flashes, causing them all to flinch from the bright light. When they turn back, they find Miku standing alone, clutching the camera and panting softly from adrenaline. The spirit has been vanquished yet again for the time being.

Turning back to the altar, Miku finally retrieves the scroll. Carefully unfurling it, she takes in its faded design for a moment before her eyes suddenly light up with recognition. She takes it with her, making her way back towards the cherry atrium, and then–

The echo fades. They all sigh, staring at the door Miku's vestige disappeared through. So much backtracking. These echoes are so taxing.

But it must have been so much worse for poor Miku.

Hisoka breaks the momentary silence with a pensive hum. "I recognize that scroll. I think I saw it hanging on a wall earlier. There must be something special about it if Miku thought it was worth taking it with her." She turns towards Yuri. Her small smile is sweet but sympathetic as she runs her thumb comfortingly over Yuri's knuckles. Yuri tilts her head questioningly, watching as Hisoka glances over at Mio too. "You two aren't going to like where..."

Yuri and Mio both scrunch their faces in disapproval.

Miu chuckles softly at their shared reaction. "That room with the dolls again?"

"Mhmm." Hisoka is biting down on a chuckle of her own. Yuri pouts at her, but the pout slowly subsides as she takes in the warm affection shining in Hisoka's eyes.

"Alright then, we might as well get it over with." Miu tugs on Mio, coaxing her to follow.

Mio's grumpy expression gets a bit grumpier, as if she's wondering how she let herself get talked into any of this. Her expression slowly softens as Miu eagerly takes her hand again. She tightens her grip on the spirit flashlight but allows herself to be led.

Miu beams back at her, her smile playful but genuine and encouraging. "Don't worry. I promise I won't let go."

***

Hisoka was right.

The scroll is in fact hanging innocuously on the wall when they return to the doll room. It's clearly been there for a very long time– so long that the wall behind it has become deeply discolored. It's a bit more faded and dirty than it had been in the echo. Mold has eaten away at it until it's little more than a decorative rag, but it's definitely the same scroll.

Now they just need to investigate its significance.

What made it so special that it needed an elaborate, supernatural candle puzzle to keep hidden away?

Hisoka is currently attempting to locate the memories that will show them just that, sifting through the shadows and following the stream to the next echo of Miku.

It's taking a bit longer than usual.

She's struggling to focus.

It's not because she's shadow-inundated. Thankfully, she's not quite there yet.

No, she keeps getting distracted by the emotions– the hyper-vigilance, the wariness, the mistrust– being transmitted into her senses through the hand on her waist's protective touch. It's setting her on edge, leaving her restless and making it difficult to pinpoint the next echo beneath the tangled mess of shadows hovering in the air around them.

After the fourth or fifth attempt, Hisoka sighs. Her shoulders drop in temporary defeat. Slowly, she closes her eyes, ignoring the amused stare Miu has pointed their way.

"Yuri."

"Hm?" Yuri is eyeing the doll in the white kimono standing idly behind ropes, glaring down at it suspiciously. Its eyes are hidden beneath its hair, but it still feels like it's watching them. She doesn't trust it. She's got one hand firmly on Hisoka's hip and the other hand firmly on the Camera Obscura, just in case.

"I can't focus with you doing that," Hisoka mutters to her under her breath, fidgeting with the Hinasaki hairpin.

"Doing what?"

Both of Yuri's hands unwittingly clench a little tighter. Hisoka's hips respond with a miniscule twitch.

"*That*." Hisoka scrunches herself up slightly, trying to hide her chagrin.

Yuri merely grunts again, keeping her eyes fixed on the creepy doll.

Hisoka sighs again and then gives reading the shadows another try. Once again, she's entirely unsuccessful. She quietly huffs, finally turning to give her love another look that Yuri is all too familiar with– the perfect mixture of irritation and insistence gracing perfect features. It doesn't quite conceal the inexhaustible amount of smitten affection or the smidgen of

incredulity at her own hopelessness with letting Yuri get away with as much as she does, but it does precisely convey one thing:

Yuri is *really* getting herself in trouble now.

Biting her lip again, not quite remorseful but sheepish beneath her love's incensed stare, Yuri pointedly avoids the look. She finds Mio's gaze instead. Mio has been standing vigilantly as well, keeping an eye out for danger, but much like with Miu, there's a light of mirth shining in her eyes as she watches over them.

They come to a wordless understanding. Mio subtly nods. The spirit flashlight's beam falls across the doll.

It's enough.

Yuri lowers her guard, confident that Mio can handle looking out for them in her stead. She turns her focus solely towards helping Hisoka. Hisoka gives a soft, pleased hum, and then they begin scanning for the echo together.

When they finally find it buried beneath the layers, Hisoka makes eye contact with Miu. Then, they all brace and dive in.

This time, they see–

Another tiny child, one of the distinct little girls from the beginning of the stream of echoes. She seems to be playing hide and seek as well, giggling softly as she hides in one of the cupboards beneath the closet.

Out of the corner of her eye, Yuri notices Hisoka swallowing roughly. She can feel her anxiety rising through her palm.

They both know where this is going.

The shape of two unnaturally stretched arms appears from the shadows, reaching from inside the wall. The screaming begins. It ends just as quickly. Then there's only silence.

The scene flickers and flashes. Everything starts to distort. The room rapidly begins to decay as time passes around them.

With another flash, they see Miku defending herself, fighting back with the Camera Obscura. The spirit of the little girl seems to think it's a game– laughter rings through the air despite Miku's cries of distress.

A few well-timed photos end the fight, sealing the little girl's spirit away with her friend. Her voice echoes through the room one last time as she shrinks down into a wisp.

"Take me with you!"

Miku's shoulders fall. Her eyes are watering with both pain and sorrow as she wipes a mixture of sweat, dirt, and blood off of her shaking hands and onto her skirt. She gives herself

a moment to breathe, but only a moment.

She pushes herself to keep moving.

Scooping up the scroll from where she dropped it to defend herself, she hangs it back on the wall where it belongs. A strange clicking sound resonates as soon as it's set on its hook. Miku stares wearily. Then, she pushes on the wall, and–

They emerge from the memory somberly.

It's always hard to see an innocent soul lost. It's even harder when they're taken so young.

"Do you think they understand?" Miu breaks the tense silence with a heavy whisper. She doesn't seem to be asking anyone in particular. It doesn't sound like she necessarily even wants an answer. "The little ones..."

Mio remains still for a moment, as if she knows but doesn't want to answer. Eventually, she just sadly shakes her head.

Miu sighs, closing her eyes for a moment and leaning more heavily against her. Yuri pulls Hisoka closer. Hisoka sinks back into her arms.

The heaviness lingers.

Miu tentatively approaches the wall. Placing her hand next to the scroll, she pushes, just as her mother had. A hidden door is revealed, horribly squeaky and stiff but surprisingly still functional. The room with the kimonos awaits, just on the other side.

"Here again..." Miu glances back at the others as they all carefully slip through. "Well, it's definitely faster than backtracking... wait, it opens both ways, right?"

***

The trace brings them back to the fireplace room. Hisoka has fallen still in front of the old grandfather clock.

She's staring at it warily, an exhaustion beginning to show in her frame. The next echo in their stream is swirling heavily around it, likely the same darkness that set her on edge earlier. Yuri can tell she's starting to second-guess if she still wants to see what the echoes in this mansion reveal.

She's usually so curious, so eager to unravel mysteries of the past with her Shadowreading, to use it to help people– living and dead– in any way she can. The unrelenting tragedy around them is taking a toll. Her eyes are so dim in the low light.

Yuri's heart clenches in her chest. She subtly tugs on Hisoka's shirt, silent questions bright in her eyes. *Are you okay? Do you want to stop?*

Turning to her, Hisoka's expression softens. She answers silently in kind, a mere subtle shake of her head. Her eyes are still tired, but the light starts to return at her attentive care. She turns

to Miu and nods.

Miu's expression is full of worry too. It slowly eases into a small smile at Hisoka's courage and resolve. None of them want to push her– they know how hard it is. They'll all be there to catch her when she's reached her limit.

Sharpening their focus, they reach out, calling for the echoes to reveal their secrets once more. And once more, the echoes answer, snuffing out the color from the world, and–

A little boy comes bounding down the stairs, skipping two at a time. He's got a big toothy grin and a mischievous light in his eyes. His clothes match with the same era as the two little girls from the echoes prior.

"It's him," Miu mutters, watching as he scans the room, searching for a suitable place to hide. He's playing the same unending game as his companions, doomed to fade forever as the echo slowly falls silent in time. "The one who took the mirror shard."

The boy's eyes lock on the grandfather clock, neatly polished and shined. He stares curiously for a moment, mesmerized by the pendulum's swaying, filled with innocent wonder.

He loses interest.

He turns to take off again, returning his attention to his search.

Behind him the shadows are wavering. They're bending and warping, distorting the clock's face, offsetting the weights of the pendulum. The sickeningly long arms slowly appear, reaching as before.

The clock chimes out a sharp warning, but it's already too late. The little boy lets out a startled cry as the arms catch him, yanking him backwards into the clock. His shape dissipates, dissolving in the shadows within.

The pendulum falls still. Once more, only silence is left behind.

The echo changes. Time passes. The clock falls to complete ruin.

"Come and find me!"

The light of the Camera Obscura's flash fills the room.

Miku is facing off with the spirit of the boy. He's phasing in and out of sight, disappearing and reappearing all around the room. Each time Miku takes too long to find him, he jumps out at her, giggling despite her cries of pain when he catches her. Like his friends, he seems to think they're still playing their game.

Miku fights valiantly but clearly still reluctantly. She catches him in one final fatal frame before he finally cries out. His soul collapses down into blue fire, at last joining his friends, sealed safely away in the camera.

As he fades, his voice rings out one last time.

"I need to give the mirror to that man!"

Miku's shoulders slump again when it's over. She catches her breath, and then something catches her eye: the mirror shard shines brightly on the floor where the little boy had last been standing. She quickly retrieves it, scooping it up and holding it with the utmost care.

Once it's safely back in her possession, she draws up her courage and continues on, turning to climb the stairs, and–

Yuri blinks. The echo is over.

Turning back to Hisoka, she finds her gaze fixed on the floor. She's refusing to look at the grandfather clock. An object once deeply ingrained to represent comfort and safety has now been twisted, eclipsed by the dark remains of memories not their own.

A frustration is building in Yuri's chest, rooted in desperation and desire.

She wants to hold Hisoka.

She wants to take her home.

She wants to change them out of their day clothes and into something soft. She wants to carry her to the office and return them to their comfy spot on the couch, curled together beneath their warm starry blanket. She wants to give her back her book or maybe put a comforting show on the TV, anything to distract her from what they've seen here. She wants to let her lay her head on her chest and drift off to the steady sound of her heartbeat.

She wants to take Hisoka away. She wants to protect her from this darkness.

Hisoka suddenly lifts her gaze, turning it back towards her. She must sense it– all of her wants and worries, her desperate desires. She puts on a brave smile again, grateful for her care. It's a smile that tells her she's not ready to give up. She wants to push on. She doesn't want to let anyone down, especially not Miu.

Neither does Yuri, but she still worries. She'll always worry.

It occurs to her though, a bit belatedly, that this must have been exactly what she was putting Hisoka through earlier before she agreed to wear the amulet bracelet.

It's a lesson they both should have learned by now, especially after everything that happened on the mountain: no matter how badly they want to protect each other, to keep each other away from the darkness, they can't face the shadows all alone. They need each other. They need to do it together, just like they always promised they would.

She adjusts her grip; harder around the Camera Obscura, sweeter around Hisoka's hip. She's got her. She won't run ahead anymore. They'll go together.

"She got the piece of the mirror back." Miu sounds relieved, but it's cold and comfortless knowing the fate of the little boy. They start again towards the stairs, following in Miku's footsteps. "He said something about giving it to 'that man'... Who was he talking about?"

The trace leads them in the direction of the tatami room on the second floor. Yuri notices that this door has a rectangular burn on it too, like the doors to the atrium. She wonders why she hadn't noticed it earlier.

In her defense, it was dark and the mark is so faint. It's hard to make out without the light of the sun to help reveal its presence.

Upon entering, they get the answer to Miu's question.

A forceful echo envelopes their senses–

A man– the middle-aged one in the plain kimono from the overlapping echoes in the Demon Mouth– appears in front of them, heading towards the small library in the back corner of the room. He seems distressed, restlessly searching for something.

"Where is my daughter? Mikoto..."

His voice warbles sadly through time, reaching them through years of lingering in the shadows. He disappears through the opening to the library, and then–

"Mikoto...?" Miu perks up as the echo dissolves, recognition bright in her eyes. She starts to dig through her bag again. "Hold on. I think I know who that man was..."

"Mikoto..." Mio echoes the name thoughtfully. "That's what the little girl who got dragged into the well called your mom."

Miu's hum in response is noncommittal. She fishes out a thick section from the stack in her bag. Mio holds the flashlight for her as she reads it for them. "That must have been Munakata Ryozo. He was the apprentice of Makabe Seijiro, a close acquaintance of Asou. After his mentor went missing in the Minakami region, he became a well-known folklorist himself. Munakata, his wife, and his daughter moved into the mansion to study the rituals performed here. In fact, most of what we know about this place today is from his research."

Mio has that look on her face again as Miu reads, somehow both distant and present, wistful but intense. Miu doesn't notice. Neither does Hisoka.

Yuri does though. She tilts her head as she watches her, confused and concerned. Why does it feel like she knows more than she's letting on?

"Was one of those little girls his daughter then?" Hisoka asks worriedly, fidgeting with the Hinasaki hair ornament again.

Miu shakes her head. "No, his daughter survived for many years after she lived here." She answers so confidently, as if she knows it without a shadow of a doubt. Then she sighs, her voice wavering sadly, "But those must have been her friends. She was the only one to escape the curse..."

"That's not true," Mio soothes, catching Miu's distraught gaze. The look is gone. She's pulled herself back to them, this time all on her own. Miu's distress was enough motivation. "Your mom did too."

Miu offers a weak smile. There's a deep pride mixed in with the melancholy. "She did more than that. She broke the cycle for good."

It feels like Miu is talking about more than just the rope curse. Mio might be as well. It's hard to tell.

Hisoka picks up on it this time too. She subtly glances at Yuri. Yuri meets her gaze with a knowing glance of her own. They keep their silent conversation private as they continue on, chasing after the trace.

Following it through the door across from the small library, they find themselves back in the walkway above the rectangular hallway. As they pass the intersection, they all shudder, sensing a familiar hostile presence looming in the shadows. They don't stop to let it wash over them. They know exactly which one it is.

The blinded woman.

Hisoka's steps stutter as she looks past the shadow, trying to peek around it to see what's beyond. Yuri can sense that lingering is making her nervous, but something back there has caught her attention. It looks like there might be another door at the end of the hall.

"I think there was another seal on the door back there," Hisoka mutters, mostly to Yuri, but loud enough for Miu and Mio too. "It feels a little different than the others. I don't think it had a malicious spirit bound to it. It feels less potent, like there might have been a memory attached to it instead. It can't be too far from here..."

Avoiding the looming shadow for now, they make their way down the stairs, searching for the echo that sealed the room in the walkway above.

"It feels like that spirit was stalking my mom." Miu mutters, her mind still caught on the echo of the hostile ghost left in the walkway. She can't blame Hisoka for wanting to push past it. Stopping to take in every dark and dense echo they pass would not only be reckless, it would bring them closer to becoming shadow-inundated with no hope for reprieve– not this deep in the darkness. "She's blind, but it's like she could sense her, no matter where she was. Maybe she could sense her spiritual power..."

"Rei once told me that living souls glow brightly in the realm of the dead," Mio offers thoughtfully as they round a corner of the corridor. "The light they produce often attracts all sorts of strange and unnatural things."

Miu gets a distressed look on her face. "But...my mom wasn't in the realm of the dead." She winces, looking away as she thinks back to all of the harrowing experiences she knows her mother has been subjected to in her life. "...Not here anyway."

"Maybe she wasn't when she arrived," Mio starts gently, mindful that it's a wounded topic for Miu, "but the mansion definitely was. It existed on top of a hell gate, a rift that spread when the last ritual failed to seal it. It must have dragged her in without her realizing it."

Miu grunts grumpily. "I guess. Or maybe she knew and kept going anyway because she wanted to save her clueless brother..." Her scowl deepens at that thought of her uncle, her disdain for a man she's never properly met flashing dangerously in her eyes.

Yuri is well aware of the conflicted feelings Miu has regarding Mafuyu– she's ranted to her about him on several occasions. Miu is grateful that he helped her mother when she was slowly dying, that he directed her to the mountain and stayed with her in the black water until she was rescued, but she's also resentful that his actions set the long cycle of suffering that led to the agonizing situation into motion.

It wasn't his fault that Miku's lifespan temporarily fractured, of course.

But it *is* his fault that Miku wound up in the realm of the dead in the first place– not just here, but a second time too, years after what happened at the Himuro Mansion occurred.

Yuri doesn't know the details; she tries really hard not to accidentally use her glancing, especially on the people she loves. But she does know Miku and Rei were once caught in a different rift together. They became lost in nightmares, trapped and chasing their grief, their survivor's guilt, deeper and deeper until there was almost no hope of return. At some point during those nightmares, the catalyst occurred that brought about Miu's existence as a shadowborn: half Hinasaki, half Kurosawa, the product of red thread and devotion.

That brief moment of vulnerability, however, also exposed Miku's soul directly to the ink curse, tearing it between a longing for life and an acceptance of death, leaving it fragmented and fleeting.

They fixed it. It didn't come easy, but Miku’s soul has been remedied now. She's okay. She's going to stay.

But in Miu's eyes, it all started because of him. Good intentions or not, Miku's brother– Miu's uncle– chose to willingly leave Miku behind. He abandoned her in the realm of the living to suffer and grieve all alone.

It's an act Miu has yet to forgive him for.

But she's trying to understand. That's why they're here. Regardless of if what they find changes her mind, Miu wants to understand.

Yuri just hopes that in doing so, she doesn't wind up with more than she ever wanted to know.

Hisoka leads them to a strange opening in the wall, a crevice that extends deep inside of it. Yuri can't fathom its purpose; it doesn't seem wide enough to have been used for storage. She peeks down into it though and sees why Hisoka stopped: there's an echo at the very back, caught perpetually reverberating between the walls.

Yuri shares another look with Miu. Then, they both reach back for it and see–

"You have to leave! Hurry!"

The little girl in the white kimono is insistently tugging something small and confused out from the deepest part of the crevice. Her frame is slightly translucent and shifting, flickering just barely as she moves. To the inexperienced eye, it might not look like much. Perhaps just a distortion in the echo.

But Yuri can tell. She knows Hisoka and Miu can tell too.

The little girl in the white kimono is a ghost.

The little spirit stumbles back, revealing yet another young child emerging from the depths of the wall. This new arrival, a girl they haven't yet seen in any of the other echoes, looks perplexed and alarmed as she steps back into the hallway, blinking and squinting in the light. She must have been playing hide and seek with the others. She must have been waiting to be discovered for a very long time.

There's something about her that seems intensely familiar. Yuri's not sure what.

"Kirie? What's wrong?"

The name makes Miu quietly gasp. She repeats it under her breath, echoing the new little girl in shock. "Kirie...?"

"You have to leave, Mikoto! Now! He's coming!"

"But...my friends. And my mother and father– wait!" Mikoto protests, looking back over her shoulder as the little girl in the kimono– Kirie– starts to drag her down the hall, away from the crevice and away from them.

As they go, disappearing around the corner, Yuri's gaze catches on the ornate hair accessory at the back of Mikoto's head. Her eyes widen in shock. Beside her she hears Hisoka stifle a gasp. She must have caught it too.

Their eyes flicker to the Hinasaki heirloom, still clasped in Hisoka's hands.

It's one and the same–

The echo abruptly ends.

Yuri and Hisoka both glance at Miu. She's already staring back at them, looking deeply uncomfortable and on edge but not as if she hadn't expected it. She subtly shakes her head, her eyes silently pleading with them to not mention it out loud– not yet.

Yuri and Hisoka immediately acquiesce. They share another subtle glance with each other, silently promising to question Miu about it as soon as they can but dropping the subject for now.

Things just got more complicated. There's more layered here than just the muddled echoes.

"The little girl in white. The same one that was helping your mom. Her name was Kirie." Mio has a deeply pensive look on her face as she stares off into the space where the echo ended.

She turns and raises an eyebrow at Miu and Hisoka. She doesn't seem to notice the tension stirring between the three younger girls– or if she does, she's not acknowledging it. "You're sure she's from a different time period than the rest of the children?"

Both Miu and Hisoka nod.

"She was definitely already a spirit by the time that echo took place." Hisoka is trying to keep her expression neutral. Yuri can sense a flurry of unease and inquisitiveness running through her. She's doing a good job of hiding it at Miu's silent request.

Mio hums in response, nodding as she returns her gaze down the hall, staring after the echo of the two young girls– one corporeal, one incorporeal. "That must have been how Mikoto survived then. Kirie helped her escape. If Kirie was already a ghost though, that means Mikoto must have had a sixth sense too. This place really seemed to draw people like that in..."

"People..." Miu shifts uncomfortably, tugging at the strap of her bag. "...like us?"

Mio's expression softens as she turns back to her. A small, fond smile tugs at her lips. "Yeah. People like us."

She emphasizes the final word. A gentle reminder that they're not alone. They have each other.

Miu relaxes. Her smile is soft too.

***

Back up the stairs, beyond the formerly sealed door in the walkway, they find themselves in a simple room with an old koto resting on tatami. On the surface, there's not too much to see, aside from a tightly locked closet and what appears to be a scattered stack of old photographs spilled across the floor.

Beneath the surface, however...

"The echoes here are really deep again," Hisoka warns, looking around the relatively small space warily. "They feel more attached to the token too. Miku might have left behind more than just the echo of her presence."

Or perhaps her ancestors did…

"These look like they were taken with the Camera Obscura." Miu is squinting down at the scattered photos. She doesn't reach down to touch them just yet. "They feel like they've been here for a long time though. I don't think my mom or even my uncle could have taken them."

"The black and white prints most Camera Obscuras produce can last decades, if not centuries, under the right conditions." Mio is shining the spirit flashlight down, sweeping across them in an effort to make anything out of the pitch-black images. They're all completely ruined. "The silver in these has completely oxidized. Moisture and dust must have caused them to decay faster than usual."

"Oh." Miu snaps her gaze towards Mio with an amused grin. "So you're a nerd too."

"*No*," Mio snorts, "your mother is. Everything I know about photography, I learned from years of spending time with Rei."

"Ah. That's fair, I guess," Miu chuckles. "I think we've all gotten a few impromptu lessons since we've been together. She gets so excited."

"She does." Mio nods, affection shining in her eyes. "It's where you two get your nerdiness from."

Both Miu and Hisoka get faux affronted looks on their faces. Mostly faux anyway.

Mio misses both. She's turned her gaze back down to the photos, tilting her head to try a different angle on them. There's still nothing to be discerned. "Hisoka used to get lessons all the time when she was younger," she continues casually. "Rei used to hold her in her lap and teach her all about how her conventional camera worked. She'd let her practice taking photos with it too. I'm pretty sure Rei still keeps the very first one she ever took in her wallet..."

"She does," Yuri confirms, speaking up softly after remaining quiet for a while. She's been content with just listening as they talk. There's a doting shine in her eyes that she's turned towards Hisoka. "Rei showed me when we first met. It's really cute."

And it really is. Hisoka was so small, all cuddled up with Rei and her little plush fox. They both have the same exact utterly bewildered look on their face, as if they were caught off guard by the camera's flash.

Hisoka sighs irritably, her cheeks dusting a soft red. Mio and Miu both snicker quietly beside them. "Are we ready to keep going?"

"Yeah, yeah..." Miu chuckles again at her annoyance but takes Mio's hand. They both step forward to stand closer to Hisoka and Yuri, ready to sift through the reverberating clutter along with them.

"Wait, Miu..." Hisoka stops them before they can truly begin. She pauses, looking at her worriedly. "...Be careful."

Miu frowns at her worry. "That bad, huh?"

"They're *really* deep," Hisoka shakes her head, distraught and fretting. She unconsciously leans back into Yuri again, glancing between Miu and the photos. Yuri squeezes her hip comfortingly. "I don't know what they'll show, but they feel different. They might have something more to do with your mom's past and your family's Camera Obscura than the tragedies that happened here at the mansion..."

Miu's eyes soften. She offers a brave smile, grateful for her care. "It's okay. I know."

Hisoka tilts her head curiously. The worry remains written in her features, but she nods, trusting Miu's confidence.

"Okay...everybody ready?" Miu looks between them all once more.

They all nod, taking comfort and strength in each other's presence. The echoes fall into focus around them as they reach into the past, and then–

A woman in a dark kimono kneels on the tatami, frantically looking through the photographs scattered all around her. She's muttering to herself, nearly hysterical as she examines each one, staring as if she can't believe what her eyes are showing her.

The photos reveal things, things that can't possibly exist. Shadows and shapes looming in the background, darkness and danger hiding all over in the world around them. She must have taken the photos herself; a Camera Obscura rests beside her. It looks unnervingly like the Hinasaki Camera Obscura. They appear to be identical.

Much like the young girl, Mikoto, there's something undeniably familiar about the woman. The hallmarks of the bloodline run strong through each generation, it would seem.

All the way down to the present day...

"That... must be the folklorist's wife." Mio's voice breaks through the echo. She sounds unnerved again, distant even though she's right beside them. The words are spoken with a slight tremble. "She used the camera too..."

As she says it, the echo changes. Time rapidly passes in front of their eyes again, shifting and warping the room in and out of age and shape. It flashes and flickers until they finally see Miku. She's staring down at the photos, distress bright in her eyes as well.

"These photos... They're the same as–"

She doesn't get to complete the thought.

The echo drags them even deeper.

They're no longer in the koto room, no longer even at the Himuro Mansion– they're somewhere else. A residential house, charming but mundane. Miku is there. She looks even younger but no less sad or lonely.

The sound of the Camera Obscura firing fills their ears. The echo– the memory within a memory– moves, following Miku as Miku follows the sound. She finds the source in the house's living room. Another woman stands within, fighting off an evanescent silhouette with that same exact Camera Obscura. The shadow is just barely visible in the echo, flitting around the room and flinching back with each shutter clash.

The young vestige of Miku tilts her head, watching for a moment. Then, she works up the nerve to call out, worried and fearful.

"Mom?"

The woman with the camera turns. Yuri's eyes widen again.

The resemblance is striking.

The folklorist's wife, Mikoto, Miku's mother, Miku, Miu...

The Hinasakis really have been haunted for generations–

When the echo ends, they all turn to Miu. Miu is staring off into space, still processing the echo with distress blatant in her eyes. She pulls herself back to the surface when she feels their attention on her.

Shrinking slightly beneath their gaze, she mumbles sadly, avoiding their worried stares, "That... was my grandmother. She...um...hung herself when my mom was young. My mom was the one who found her." Taking a deep breath, she lets it out slowly, steadying her voice before continuing, "She doesn't like to talk about it, but I think she believes it was the Camera Obscura's power that drove her mother to..."

Yuri reaches out to gently squeeze her hand, silently telling her that she doesn't have to say anymore. They understand. They've got her.

And though she's not here right now, they've got Miku too.

No one speaks any further on the heavy revelation. It lingers in the darkness around them regardless, setting in and rumbling like a storm nearly overhead.

The history of the Hinasaki bloodline is far more intertwined in the dark echoes here than ever could have been foretold.

***

They make their way back to the tatami room in silence, the heaviness following them out. Miu remains quiet, still lost in thought but trusting Hisoka to keep them on the right path.

Yuri glances over her shoulder as they walk, still watching her worriedly. Mio is watching her too, keeping the spirit light pointed forward to light the way but keeping her eyes on the youngest Hinasaki. Their eyes briefly meet, straying from Miu for just a moment. Yuri can tell they're both wondering the same thing: how much deeper into this do they want to dive?

"Miu," Mio calls her back to them softly, careful not to startle her. Miu's dark gaze snaps to her inquisitively. "We don't have to keep going if you don't want to..."

Hisoka and Yuri slow to a stop in front of them, causing them to slow and stop too. They both turn to fully face Miu, silently offering their support with whatever she chooses as well.

In other circumstances, Miu might have scoffed at them. She might have rolled her eyes and offered some wry quip, flat-out refusing to entertain even the thought of giving up.

This time, however, her silence lingers as she pauses to consider.

"I... still want to know what happened to my uncle," she finally starts after a moment. "I'm a little worried about what else we might find out. But I don't want to give up just yet." Her

voice falls a little softer as she looks between them. She appears to be trying not to shrink into herself again. "Will...will you all stay with me? I think I can face it as long as you're all by my side."

"We're not going to leave you," Mio promises, winding an arm around her shoulder and pulling her close.

"We always stick together, no matter what, remember?" Yuri whispers as well, squeezing Hisoka's hand as Hisoka nods in agreement. Hisoka isn't the only one she made promises to. She plans on keeping the promises she made to Miu too– no matter where that leads them.

They're not alone anymore.

Miu sighs, nodding a bit meekly. The tension eases from her frame as she sinks against Mio, leaning into her sideways embrace. She's not shrinking down; she's allowing herself to be comforted, trusting them with her worries and fears.

When they first met, she never would have allowed herself to be so vulnerable. Yuri can't help but feel really proud of her. She can sense that Hisoka feels the same.

The token cradled between Hisoka's palms points them to a door in the back of the tatami room, one they have yet to pass through. Yuri thinks she remembers seeing a balcony from the atrium that would line up to about the other side of the door. Without seeing beyond it though, she can't be certain what lies on the other side.

Hisoka's footsteps stutter to a halt again right in front of it. She wearily glances back at them over her shoulder. The graveness in her eyes has returned. She looks even more concerned than she had in the koto room.

Another deep pool in the stream.

Miu meets her gaze without wavering. She nods and then, keeping a firm hold of Mio's hand, steps forward to help Yuri slide the door open.

The space beyond is indeed the balcony Yuri had spotted earlier.

It overlooks the whole atrium, offering a breathtaking view of the shrine, the cherry blossom tree, and the paths that connect everything in between. It would be the perfect place to look to the sky, to watch the moon and the stars– if only it were just about anywhere else.

The echoes they're searching for don't originate from the balcony itself.

They seem to be reverberating up to it from the yard, ringing off the roof tiles and in the space between the posts of the railing, loud and overwhelming from the moment they step out. The shadows are reaching up to them, demanding their attention, demanding to be seen, dragging them in, and–

The creaking of rope reaches their ears first. Back and forth. Back and forth.

In the grey, the atrium looks a little different. The torii gates look less weathered, the cherry blossom tree less mature. Nature has yet to consume the grounds or the grave standing solemnly beneath them.

It's quiet at the Himuro Mansion, nothing else but the breeze and water in the distance to fill the silence. Nothing seems to be out of place except that incessant creaking, and–

The shape swinging in the tree.

The folklorist's wife. She's hung herself.

Yuri feels a wave of terror and anguish wash over her, far sharper than her own. She hears Miu gasp beside her.

Quickly turning towards her, she finds her clinging to Mio's arm, a look of distress in her features.

Miu isn't looking down into the atrium though.

She's looking up at Mio.

Mio is on the verge of hyperventilating, her eyes wide and her face pale. Her gaze is fixed on the rope around the folklorist's wife's neck, seeing the echo in front of them but seeing something else too.

"Mio!" Miu cries out her name, tugging on her arm, trying to pull her back to them. Mio jolts at her call, shaking her head as if trying to make the vision go away. She stumbles into Miu, who stumbles into Yuri, who stumbles into Hisoka, and then–

They all tumble a layer deeper.

The swinging of the rope intensifies, so loud that it's grating on their ears, echoing in layers overlapped.

When they look up, they've left behind the Himuro Mansion again. That same residential household appears before them– the former Hinasaki residence. Miku, the younger version, stands in front of them, trembling and devastated as she stares up at a barren tree in the backyard.

"Why..." Her voice shakes and then breaks. Her mother's lifeless body hangs from a sturdy branch. "What happened...?"

The echo distorts. They're pulled even deeper. The world is flashing and melting before their eyes. The surface is receding, rising farther away, and then they're–

Somewhere else, somewhere darker, somewhere lost in the past.

Another body swings from a tree. Another girl in a white kimono. She's familiar, somehow familiar, features and frame familiar, dead eyes familiar, but she's–

Blood.

There's blood, spilled and sprayed all around the room, dripping from the walls and partitions, staining the tatami, soaking into the ashes of the hearth. The same girl stands in the center laughing, loud, unhinged, insane, filling the space with violence and terror. A deep, dark mark is wrapped around her throat from where the rope took her life. A murky shadow haunts the air around her, circling like an unholy predator.

The echo is rapidly deteriorating, blackness like ink creeping in at the edges, dragging them further under. It's consuming them, drowning them, until all they can see are black eyes and that deranged grin, and–

A brilliant crimson glow cuts into the echo.

It starts small and weak but builds, shining brighter and brighter until it's nearly blinding. It burns the darkness away, flashing and fluttering like frantic butterfly wings.

The echo sharpens again, the world coming back into focus and returning their feet to solid ground. They're back on the surface, back at the Himuro Mansion, back–

"Mio," Miu whispers urgently, holding Mio's face in between her palms. She's pivoted in front of her, trying to shield her from the echo with her body, trying to keep her safe. She's panting and shaking, trying to hold herself together. The intensity of the echo is taking an excruciating toll, but she's forcing herself to focus on just Mio. "It's okay. It's just an echo. It's over. I'm right here. Just focus on me."

Mio is blinking frantically, gripping Miu's wrists to ground herself. She shakes her head again, but she's present, she's on the surface with them. Her eyes are fixed down at the cherry blossom tree.

"No, it's not. Look!"

They all turn back towards the atrium below. Their vision is still grey. They're still in the echo–

Miku stands looking up at the cherry blossom tree too, her hand held in front of her heart. She's shaking, seeing the echo of the folklorist's wife hanging in the dark. She looks so small and young down there all alone, haunted by her own memories as they mingle with the spirit's in front of her.

Seeing her like this reminds Yuri of the first time she met Miu.

Movement catches her eye, causing her to jump. Miku jumps with her, drawing back and away from the tree. The folklorist's wife has snapped her head up to stare from where she hangs, eyes white and glossed over with death but firmly fixed on Miku.

She's no longer an echo. She's a hostile spirit.

"I want my daughter back."

The spirit falls from the tree, lurching at Miku. Miku falls back just in time, raising the camera and taking aim.

The echo flashes, filling their vision with stark white as Miku steps into battle with the spirit. When it clears, their vision returning, she's already ending it, sealing the woman with the spirits of the children and the novelist's team. The ghost flares brightly before collapsing down into a wisp and disappearing inside the camera as well.

The atrium falls silent and empty once more. Only the brave young girl remains, standing alone in the darkness.

Swiping at her tears, Miku starts back towards the mansion, footsteps trailing heavily, and–

It finally ends. Color burns brightly in their eyes as it returns to saturate the world, sharp and disorienting, tinted with lingering shades of red.

It was too much. It's all too much.

Conscious but drained, they all slump to the floorboards beneath their feet.

Chapter End Notes

):

It's all connected...

Thanks for reading! More on the way!

Chapter 6: Demon Tag pt.3

Chapter Notes

> Lots of long conversations and a small handful of well-deserved rests in this chapter. The girls deserve it after everything, y'know?
>
> Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Mio?" Miu whispers, trying to call her back to them.

The echoes nearly swept them away this time. They made it out by some miracle, but not all unscathed. The three younger girls decided on taking a short break, sharing a silent look as they took in the depth of Mio's shaken state. Now, they're resting, seated in a close circle on the weathered wood of the balcony.

Leaning forward trying to catch Mio's gaze when she doesn't respond, Miu tries again. "Mio... are you okay?"

Mio has remained completely silent, staring vacantly off into space. Though they're no longer trapped drowning in the echo, a part of her still seems to be there, left behind in...wherever that was. Somewhere in her past. Somewhere that reeked of blood and decay. Somewhere where the sun never rose and the distant din of sinister laughter promised violence and terror upon anyone unlucky enough to stumble inside.

It has them all deeply worried.

Sensing them all watching her, Mio finally pulls herself back to them. She's still trembling, as if the chill of the memories is still lingering all across her skin, but she's trying to shove it all back down into the dark recesses of her mind. She almost seems frustrated again. Not with them or even with the echoes. She seems frustrated with *herself*.

"Yeah, I'm fine, I'm..." Mio sighs heavily. "I'm sorry."

Miu shakes her head, looking at her sympathetically but also a bit confused. "For what?"

Mio gives her a tired look, one that clearly states *you know what*. Glancing between them, she seems to make sure they're all truly okay before letting her gaze fall dejectedly back to the peeling floorboards.

"Mio," Hisoka tries next, offering reassurance in her typical warm and compassionate way. "It's alright. You didn't do anything wrong. If anything, we're the ones who are sorry."

Mio huffs, shaking her head, again mostly at herself. Her expression darkens further. "This whole time you've been worried about drowning in these ‘pools,’ these 'deep echoes of the past.' Then I'm the one who nearly drags us under with my own–" She cuts herself off, sighing again. "Some protector I am. I'm so sorry."

"Hey, stop," Miu gently scolds, sounding more like her mother than she'd ever want pointed out. "You didn't mean to. And you got us back out of it too. You still protected us."

"I didn't do anything," Mio mutters stubbornly, glaring downwards at nothing in particular. She seems to be trying not to sink into herself again, for the girls’ sake, but struggling with a suffocating amount of guilt and shame. Whatever that memory was of, whatever it showed, it's something that hurt Mio deeply. It's a pain she's never fully healed from, that she never wants to speak aloud, much less allow others to witness.

Yuri understands that.

They all do. They all have scars, secrets they don't want to reveal.

Yuri has only ever fully confided in Hisoka about hers, and only really felt strong enough to do so after her final confrontation with Ose– nearly losing Hisoka and all of the revelations that came afterwards and in between drew forth a courage and clarity she'd never before known herself capable of. She promised herself she'd give Hisoka everything, and that's exactly what she's done in the time since. Miu knows many of her deepest secrets too, but it's a slower process of give and take on both of their parts.

They won't pry with Mio. She has to be ready to open up– her heart, her thoughts, and her wounds– all in her own time. But they can still remind her that she's not alone. They can be there for her until she's ready.

And Yuri knows just the thing to help with that.

Mio doesn't have the Mt. Hikami Glancing ability. Her sixth sense is clearly present but also unique, different in manners yet to be entirely divulged. The trick may work a bit differently on her. But with the bracelet wrapped around her wrist, Yuri might just be able to...

To everyone's surprise, she reaches her hand out to Mio. Mio blinks at her, giving her a look of confusion and furrowing her brow.

Then, slowly, she reaches back.

Yuri smiles.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she lets a soothing calm fill her chest, allowing it to spread through her. Then, she lets it wash into Mio too.

She's not taking her distress from her, intentionally or unintentionally– a feat that's much easier with the bracelet shielding her. If there's one thing she's learned from all of her experiences with her psychic senses and the paths they've set her on, it's that people need to feel their emotions to process them. Otherwise the pain and grief never truly fade. She's

merely distracting Mio from it for a while, giving her something else, something safe and gentle, to focus on until she can process and let go of it on her own.

When she's certain Mio is steady, fully back on the surface with them, she whispers earnestly, hoping Mio can finally believe it. "We're okay. We just want to make sure you are too."

Mio holds her gaze, staring at her wearily as the feeling courses through her. Then, finally, she deflates, allowing the tension to dissipate from her frame. She musters a small smile for Yuri in return. It's weak, but it's a start. "Hm. That's a neat trick. Where did you learn that?"

Yuri tilts her head, caught off guard that Mio caught on so quickly. Her sixth sense is still different from theirs but obviously more refined than she could have ever guessed.

Either that, or she's just *really* used to dealing with people with powers like theirs...

"Um... Miku taught me– sort of," Yuri offers in explanation. Miu turns to her and blinks, so she continues with an awkward shrug, "I noticed that when any of us are upset, she'll ground herself before reaching out to hold our hand. I think she knows we can feel her, so she lets her calm soothe us too. What? You never noticed that she–?"

"No, I knew... kind of." Miu interrupts, waving a hand in irritation. Yuri knows it's not directed at her; it's more at her own delay in registering how her mother manages the efficiency of her often quiet but steady reassurance. Miku has always had an undeniably soothing presence, even when she's not trying, but her care has always been set apart by its seemingly unfailing ability to put them all at ease regardless of the severity of the situation they're facing. The fact that she's been using what she knows of their powers to better tailor her care adds another layer of depth and complexity that Miu hadn't previously accounted for. She always assumed that's just how her mother innately is. "I guess I just didn't realize she was doing it intentionally..."

"It definitely sounds like something she'd do," Mio chuckles softly, settling a little more comfortably back against a balcony railing beam. "She's always had a way of using what she's learned from everything she's been through to do good for others. Even after everything she's lost..." She trails off. Then, she winces, her demeanor falling subdued again. Her voice falls to a raw mumble as she admits, offering a sincere moment of vulnerability, "I...went through a similar experience with the supernatural when I was younger. I was the only one who was rescued too. Back then, I felt like no one could ever understand my pain, the pain of what I had been through...of what I lost..." Her fingers brush over the deep red butterfly burned into her neck. She doesn't even seem to notice she's doing it at first. She catches herself after a moment and pulls back her hand as if it's been burned. Balling up her hand, she returns it to her lap before shrugging. "Then Kei brought me to meet Rei and Miku. I was so nervous, but they both made me feel safe. Especially Miku. She understood me and what I'd been through perfectly. I always wished she could have stayed so I could have gotten to know her better back then. I'm glad I'm getting the chance now. And Kei and Rei did a really good job of being there for me in her absence. Even if their experiences were a little different..."

She gives them a lopsided smile before falling quiet again. She clearly does not want to talk about her cryptic past further.

They still won't pry.

But Hisoka and Miu both have knowing and sad looks on their faces.

Miu looks deeply guilty, as if Mio’s heartache and painful experiences are somehow all her fault. She wasn't even born yet, yet she's blaming herself. Her expression quickly shifts back to a look of irritation as she dodges Mio’s hand reaching out to ruffle her hair. She swats at it and sulks.

Hisoka's expression is more of an anguished look of realization. Yuri knows that look in her eyes. She must have memories of something, memories that are just now resurfacing.

Trying to hide her distress, Hisoka tucks herself in a little closer to Yuri. Yuri doesn't hesitate to pull her closer. She finds herself wishing she could do more to comfort her again. She swears to herself that she will the moment they're away from this place.

In the meantime, she subtly tries to catch Hisoka's gaze, asking a silent question. Hisoka allows it and gives her a look in return, a promise to tell her what she remembers soon.

Yuri has a feeling it has something to do with Mio's secret passenger.

With Mio's hand in hers, she can still make out a faint silhouette glowing red, wings fluttering against a dark sky– always present but eternally out of reach. It's steeped in hope but wistfulness, a promise seemingly broken yet somehow still whole.

Mio has been running from something in her heart and mind for a very long time.

***

Eventually, Mio rises to her feet. Yuri is quick to follow, offering her hand down to Hisoka as Mio offers hers down to Miu.

The sun is rising higher in the sky, creeping closer and closer to the west.

Daylight is burning.

Miu and Hisoka suggest that they rest for longer to give themselves time to recuperate after such a close call. They phrase it as if they all need a moment, but it's clear that they're suggesting it for Mio's sake more than anything. Mio catches on and gently brushes them off, reminding them that the quicker they investigate what happened here, the sooner they can all leave.

"None of us want to be here after dark," Mio starts, glancing at the sun as if trying to gauge how much time they have left before sundown, "and last I checked, you three aren't terribly fond of the sunset. It's for the best if we're on our way out by then." She's still shivering, wiping her palms over the seams of her pants as if trying to scrub a burned-in feeling off of them. She meets their lingering worried looks with a playful smile, still trying to bury her vulnerability. "Don't worry, I'm fine. I think this place is just getting to me too. Let's get going so we can go home."

Miu and Hisoka sigh, but they all agree: waiting around for twilight, when the rift will fall even thinner than it already is, would be risky, practically inviting danger and misfortune. They follow behind as Mio leads them back inside, using the spirit flashlight to light the way.

When trying to decide how to proceed, Miu suggests that they should try to find Miku's echo near the doll room.

"Her shadow was walking back towards the porch when the echo ended," she argues as they're descending the creaking stairs in the fireplace room. "We should be able to pick her trace back up from there."

Hisoka shakes her head, her attention honed on the hairpin between her palms. "I can sense the stream cutting back through this room. She must have gone through the doll room, passing through that secret door, and then made her way back this way. It feels like she went back towards the entrance this time."

Miu acquiesces without protest, trusting her judgement.

They follow Hisoka's intuition, stepping past the ominous mirror and through the hallway with the dangling ropes. When they arrive at the entrance, she leads them carefully around the collapsed hole in the floor and over to the wall in the east, where the mount adorned with a Sanskrit marking still bears a mask with a furious expression. It's hanging crookedly, not quite level on its hooks.

At first glance, it looks as though they've met a dead end.

Miu stops in front of the wall with a perplexed expression, much like she had in the fishtank room. There's a shine in her eyes as if she's familiar with the view before them but still somehow expects something else to be there instead. She reaches out to brush her fingers over the mask, adjusting it until it properly rests on its hook. The action is met with the muted clack of a latch shifting inside the wall. They all jump, staring at the wall in astonishment.

"Another hidden door..." Hisoka breathes as Miu pushes the creaky panel open, revealing the creepy secret passage waiting just beyond. It's dark inside. Unfathomably dark. Even the spirit flashlight seems to be struggling to cut through it as Mio points it past the opening.

Miu's perplexed expression intensifies.

"But..." She glances backwards, back towards the way they came, before turning back to the mysterious hallway.

"Miu..." Hisoka watches her with a frown, perplexed by her perplexion. She glances at Yuri, who shakes her head with a shrug, unsure of the cause behind Miu's confusion as well. "What is it?"

"I..." Miu looks up at her, mirroring her frown. She suddenly looks sheepish, reluctant to explain herself. "It's just..."

Mio's gentle chuckle finally cuts into their confusion. "You've been using your glancing on your mothers, haven't you?"

Hisoka and Yuri turn back to Miu, both with their eyebrows raised– not accusingly but still a little surprised.

Miu scrunches her shoulders guiltily but argues in indignation, "It's not like I necessarily mean to!"

And it's true, she doesn't often intentionally use her abilities on her loved ones– none of them do. It would be an unwarranted violation of privacy.

Then she mutters, averting her gaze, amending to be honest, "...all the time..."

She means well.

"It's alright," Mio soothes, chuckling again and coaxing the girl into lowering her guard. For a split second, there's a hint of fear in her eyes. As if she's worried Miu might have done the same to her. "I know you only have good intentions."

Miu doesn't notice. She's pouting, still stifling her defensiveness as she mumbles forlornly, "It's just... I can feel them. I can still feel their pain. I just... I just want to help..."

The fear in Mio's eyes dissolves, replaced instead with wist and affection. She nods understandingly. Her voice remains gentle as they cautiously step into the creepy passage. "There are some things in life that can never be fixed, wounds that never fully heal no matter how badly we wish they would. We don't get to choose what stays and what fades away. All we can do is be there for them through it." Her smile softens, turning playful even in the darkness. She motions towards Hisoka. "Tiny Rei probably doesn't remember," Hisoka looks up from the token to give her an unamused look but quickly deflates at the affection still shining in her eyes, this time directed her way, "but she helped teach me that way back when she was still little."

Hisoka relaxes, shyly smiling back. As they round the corner in the narrow corridor, she murmurs quietly in response, "I remember."

Keeping her eyes on Hisoka, Miu giggles fondly, "How did that nickname even start?"

It seems like a silly conversation to be having given their location and the echoing tragedies filling the air around them, but they've got to make their own light somehow. Long ago, before they found each other, they might not have been able to. Nowadays, now that they're together, they're becoming quite skilled at it. It helps, especially in the sometimes dubious supernatural situations they often find themselves in.

Much like this one.

They're also trying to distract Hisoka. She's been grimacing at the severe lack of space and light since they opened the secret passage. She still gets quite claustrophobic. Sifting through the shadows to find the trace is leaving her even more vulnerable to it.

Thankfully, Yuri is remaining close, holding her waist and chasing off her fears, and Mio and Miu's banter, even at her expense, is soothing in the uncanny heaviness reverberating between the mansion's walls. It's enough to keep her moving forward, searching for answers lost in the dark.

Regardless, Hisoka still huffs, rolling her eyes and turning her focus back towards the token.

Mio grins, the memory warm and bright in her dark brown eyes.

"Well, when my uncle and I first met Hisoka," she starts, recalling the tale, "we found ourselves faced with what appeared to be an exact carbon copy of Rei– only obviously much smaller. She was hiding behind Rei, clinging to both a handful of Rei's shirt and a scruffy little plush fox, peering back at us nervously as if she didn't quite know what to make of us. My uncle, in all of his infinite grace and wisdom, took one look at her and blurted it out in surprise. It stuck, though he's really the only one who ever uses it."

"You know, I have heard so much about this esteemed fox," Miu teases, tittering again as she watches Hisoka's ears turning red in the pale glow of the flashlight, "but I have yet to meet her in person. She must be terribly illusive..."

"She's still in storage," Hisoka grumbles, expression scrunched in irritation. She glances down an offshoot that ends in another masked wall panel. It's hard to make out its expression in the dark. There's something else down the offshoot as well, another door on the perpendicular wall. Dangerous shadows are seeping beneath the frame, rolling out in waves like the churning tide of a tenebrous sea– more fear and tragedy hidden within. Hisoka shivers and pushes onward, bypassing the offshoot altogether. Yuri can tell she hopes they don't have to address what lies beyond that door. She really hopes they don't have to either. "I'll pull her back out eventually..."

Yuri perks up in delight.

She'd also very much like to meet this renowned fox. She'd like to thank her in person for all of the comfort and care she offered Hisoka over the years, especially when she was all alone. She'll have to find a place of honor for her, likely somewhere in their room, perhaps on their bed or on one of their dressers. She doubts Hisoka would let her get away with placing her somewhere in the shop– not for sale, of course, just a nice, warm place in the sun where she could watch over them as they work…

Mio's grin widens. She leans in close to Miu as if she's going to tell her a secret but whispers loudly, ensuring that it's heard by all parties present, "You've already met Yuri. They're pretty much the exact same."

Hisoka quickly sends a glare and a grumpy noise their way. Unfazed, they both just snicker at her.

Then she notices Yuri beaming at her excitedly. Her irritated sigh melts into an annoyed but smitten smile again.

"*Soon*, I promise. Now, focus."

Hisoka carefully leads them through yet another rotating door adorned with yet another mask. This one looks almost sad as they pass it by, leaving it in the darkness and cobwebs it permanently resides in. They arrive beyond it to find a room with a large central pillar raised a few steps off the ground. Each side bears a Sanskrit character and a hook, all identical to the ones on each of the secret doors.

"Look at these symbols," Miu mutters, brushing her fingers over the grooves that make up the Sanskrit etched into the wood. "This one is the same as the one behind that angry mask at the entrance..."

Yuri tilts her head, examining the markings beside her. She recognizes them too. They're all over the mansion. "They're on all of the doors with the broken Himuro crests too. There must be something special about them."

There's a sudden absence at her side. It doesn't take more than a second for her to realize Hisoka has slipped from her grasp. She hastily searches for her only to find her standing and staring at a peculiar mask hanging on the back wall. This one looks a little different than the others; its gaping eyes feel as if they're staring right back.

Hisoka shivers and then looks back at Yuri. Yuri immediately moves to join her. Mio and Miu follow close behind.

The darkness pouring out of the eyes of the mask is the same as what had been seeping from the door in the passageway. It must be the same room. The closer they get to it, the thicker the shadows become until it almost feels like they're breathing it in like smoke.

There's a reluctance amongst them again. A hesitance to peer in and see what the past has to offer, hanging heavily in the air on the other side. The echoes feel horribly violent, years upon years of anguish and cold brutality condensed and layered on top of each other.

Yuri tugs on Hisoka. When their eyes meet, she wordlessly tells her that they don't have to look if she doesn't want to. The shadows are already taking a toll– Hisoka can't hide her weariness, not from her.

Once more, Hisoka smiles at her gratefully but shakes her head. Then she glances over at Miu. Miu seems to have just finished a silent conversation of her own with Mio. They're both already staring back, determined and ready to dive into the next pool together.

Yuri internally sighs.

Returning Hisoka's soft smile, she takes her gently by the hand. Then they both turn towards the mask.

Reaching out to it, they see–

Miku standing in front of them, wearily preparing herself to peer beyond the mask as well. The darkness dripping from its eyes was just as potent back then.

Through the eyes of the mask, the echo drops a layer deeper, another echo within echoes. They can see a beautifully decorated room, dimly lit by an ornate lantern set at its very center. The space was clearly designed to offer its beholders a breathtaking sight– perhaps one final time before a sacred but cruel ceremony. The whole room reeks of blood.

Several men appearing to be priests stand inside, restraining a terrified young woman by her shoulders. She's shaking in their grasp, staring up at what appears to be the master of the ceremony– perhaps even the master of the Himuro family, if his distinct mask and opulent kimono are any indication. He's standing over her, holding something strange, some sort of mask with two sharp stakes driven through it–

The key to the gate at the Demon Mouth.

Yuri can feel Hisoka, Miu, and Mio fighting not to turn away, knowing what's about to happen. Miku's vestige is trembling too, her breathing coming out in quiet pants. The master raises the staked mask towards the sky. What started as low chanting from the priests increases in volume and intensity.

The mask comes down, hitting its mark.

The scream of agony from the young woman causes them all to jump and flinch. The echo wavers, but they don't pull away, not yet.

The now blinded maiden stumbles to her feet, pawing at her bloodied face. She whimpers and sobs, blindly feeling around the room as the men all silently look on.

Miku makes a noise, a small sound of distress. The mask on the wall shifts beneath her fingers.

All of the men turn towards her.

All of the girls gasp and stumble back–

The echo isn't over.

Miku is still standing with them in the monochrome, tense with anxiety and fear. The fine hairs on the back of Yuri's neck stand on end. She quickly spins around, turning in time to find the blinded woman's vengeful spirit looming in the shadows behind them. She's reaching for them, clawing at the space Miku's echo occupies.

Yuri moves on instinct and impulse.

She starts to step into the spirit's path, ready to use her body to defend the people she cares about from things that aren't there, pushing them behind her and bracing for the phantom impact–

A blinding flash cuts through the echo before she can, tearing through the shades of grey. They all let out a collective breath as it dissipates around them.

"Everyone okay?" Mio whispers, angling the beam of the spirit flashlight to better illuminate the space around them. When Yuri and Hisoka nod, shaken but steady, she looks worriedly over at Miu.

Miu looks pensive, an uneasy frown tugging at her lips. She glances up at Mio, crossing her arms in front of herself before muttering, "That room… its entrance is back in that hidden passageway." She turns to look up at Hisoka worriedly. "Did my mom go in there?"

Hisoka hums, feeling for the echo stream, following it back and forth through the room. "I think so, at some point. It definitely feels like she did. The stream backtracks a few times through here though. It looks like she went somewhere else first..."

Miu grimaces. "It...must have been really scary to face all alone." She sighs sadly, shaking her head. "Should we check it out now and get it over with?"

"It's not the next echo in the stream..." Hisoka shudders once more as she brushes over the shadows. She leans back into Yuri again, seeking warmth. "But I'd say the sooner, the better."

Yuri frowns. Perhaps she should have brought her jacket...

Miu sighs again before looking up at Mio. Mio just nods before turning to light the way.

They reluctantly make their way back to the door with the shadows pouring out of it, grimacing as they all stand before it. Miu reaches out to push on it, trying to rotate it like the others. It's stuck firmly in place.

Turning to Yuri, Miu looks up at her expectantly. “Alright. Your turn.”

Yuri tilts her head, scrunching her brow. “Me? Why?”

“You're the strong one,” Miu tells her almost impatiently, as if she should've already known the answer. “If you can't open it, nothing can.”

Yuri sighs, shaking her head. “Miu, I'm not *that* strong.”

Miu hums noncommittally as if she disagrees. Beside Yuri, Hisoka shifts, shyly averting her gaze as if she also disagrees but remains silent.

Yuri sighs again at both of them but steps forward to give it an honest try.

The wood creaks and groans against the pressure as she puts all of her strength into it. The door is solid, but she can feel it bowing a bit, giving just a little around the lock holding it in place.

Despite her best efforts, it still won't budge.

Shaking her head again, she gives up. The door– and all of the secrets hidden behind it– is going to have to remain exactly as it is: sealed away for the rest of existence.

"Well. That's that then." Miu nods confidently and then turns to walk away. She gently tugs Mio along with her, back towards the path her mother's echo had set out on. “Moving on.”

As Yuri steps back, reaching for Hisoka and returning to her rightful place at her side, she gives the door one last hard look, reaching out for it past the bracelet with her abilities. Her intuition tells her that the lock probably has something to do with the scattered emotion masks adorning the rotating doors and the room with the pillar. Should they gather the masks? The secret doors won't open if their masks are removed from their respective hooks– they'd be trapped, barred from exiting beyond the narrow corridor until they put them back.

The hooks already seem a bit frail; removing the masks might seal certain doors for good. Is what's beyond that door worth the risk? They're already deeply wary of the violence and gore it keeps sealed away behind it...

"Those masks..." She mutters thoughtfully. "They must be the key."

Suddenly, she feels Hisoka's anxiety spike through her hand.

Turning to her worriedly, she finds Hisoka is already staring back, a silent plea in her eyes. She is clearly not happy about the idea of moving any of the masks. She must recognize their key role in their ability to escape from the hidden passageway too.

Miu suddenly materializes beside them again, only to poke Yuri firmly in the cheek. "Nope, not happening. Get that idea out of your impulsive mind, Kozukata."

Yuri protests with an annoyed huff, batting her hand away. She pulls Hisoka back against her with a grumpy pout. "I wasn't going to touch any of them."

"The masks are there for a reason, and these doors are barely functional. I don't want to risk us all getting trapped in here. It's claustrophobic enough as it is." Miu gives her a stern but knowing look. She knows the risks are something Yuri was taking into consideration too– especially with Hisoka with them. She knows Yuri would never intentionally do anything that would hurt or scare Hisoka. "Besides, it's fine. I don't really need to see any more of what happened in there. I know my mom wouldn't have lingered. Not in a place like that. She must have taken what she needed and left. Let's just save our strength and sanity for reading her echoes."

Her relief at avoiding a room so heavy with anguish is palpable and mutual. And they all wholeheartedly agree– Yuri included. They'll let those echoes lie alone in their darkness until they eventually fade into nothing.

Continuing on, they leave them all safely behind them.

***

The trace takes them back outside into a square garden lined by an enclosed veranda. What appears to be another stone monument stands in the center, stoic and covered in thick moss. Yuri doesn't need to touch it or reach out to its echoes to know that it's another grave. That makes four of them scattered across the mansion grounds, all unique in shape and

composition. Perhaps four important people were buried at each. Yuri has a foreboding feeling that if they continue to follow Miku's trace, they'll eventually find out.

They take another moment to rest, soaking in the sunlight and warmth in the center of the garden– another moment of reprieve before diving back into frigid shadows. Yuri and Hisoka sit side by side on the stone steps while Miu and Mio take a casual look around.

Miu has questions.

All of which she is directing at Mio.

She wants to know about the past, specifically her mothers' pasts with the supernatural. That's what they're here to find out, after all– one of her mother's pasts, anyway. But she wants to know about her other mother's past too. She wants to know as much as she can, like about what drew Rei and Miku to each other, what they experienced and faced both apart and together, what sort of things they fought through darkness and rifts to survive. She wants to know exactly what led to her existence.

Mio does not have all the answers. In fact, some of Miu's questions she can't even begin to answer, lacking even a foundation to provide honest and factual information on.

She humors Miu anyway, answering what she can the best she can.

"Why do my moms' memories of this place look so different? I saw them walk through doors that lead to completely different places here." Miu has her arms crossed in front of her again as she looks around the garden. She's eyeing the stone monument with vague interest but is clearly more interested in what Mio might have to disclose. "Like the door with the angry mask. Mama walked through it looking for my mom, but it led to the fishtank room, not that secret passageway." Then she furrows her brow, stopping to really think about it. "But Mama hadn't met my mom yet when she was experiencing the echoes we're seeing here, did she? So why then… It doesn't make any sense."

Mio titters, watching Miu trying to piece together her jumbled handful of glanced memories. "You were probably seeing Rei's memories from the Manor of Sleep," she explains, piquing Miu's intrigue again, "where you were conceived." Miu immediately gets a look on her face that makes Mio laugh more fully. "What?"

Miu's cheeks have turned a bright shade of light pink. She's tense with embarrassed annoyance. "Do you have to say it like that?"

"I mean, it's not as if it was accomplished through conventional methods..."

Miu groans, waving her hand. "Stop, okay, moving on. What is– or was– the Manor of Sleep?"

Mio tilts her head curiously, genuinely surprised. "I thought you already knew?"

"I know a bit." Miu kicks a pebble out of the path and back into its designated place in the overgrown landscaping. She's stalling, feeling vulnerable again. It's still so hard to ask for

things sometimes. "Enough to know how and why I exist. But I'd like to know more."

An indirect request, but still a request.

Mio sighs, rubbing the back of her neck awkwardly. It's clear that she wants to oblige but isn't sure if she can. "You're asking the wrong person. Your mothers and my uncle experienced the Manor a lot differently than I did. It's not easy to explain..."

"The things we experience rarely are," Miu counters, a little more gently. "Just do your best."

A familiar set of phrases to Yuri. It worked quite well on her the first time she heard it.

Mio sighs again.

Yuri stifles a smile.

It looks like it's going to work just as well on Mio too.

"Okay then..." Mio tentatively starts. "The Manor of Sleep was a rift. Another one, like the one that was here, like the Shadowspring on your mountain, and like..." She cuts herself off, swallowing coarsely. She pauses for a brief moment and then continues, "It could only be accessed by the living through dreams, hence the name. People who were burdened with grief, people who were afflicted with trauma and survivor's guilt, people who desperately longed to see a person or people they'd lost– they were all particularly susceptible to the Manor's call. The Manor would show you that person, the person you wanted to see the most, using their image to draw you in. And once it drew you in, the tattoo curse would spread, covering more and more of your body the deeper into the mansion you chased after them. And once you follow the dead, you can't come back."

"But..." Miu mutters, visibly distressed, "you all came back."

"Yeah, thanks to Rei." Mio smiles fondly. "She faced down the origin of the curse, the last shrine priestess, and put her tormented soul to rest."

She pauses again for a long moment, gathering her thoughts.

Then, she tells them what she knows of the last Tattooed Priestess.

"Long ago, the Manor of Sleep had a counterpart in the realm of the living– the Kuze Shrine. The religion of the shrine and the family that carried out its rituals would use special ink to inscribe the pain of the living into their priestesses, taking their burdens and transferring them into the priestess instead. When the priestess had taken in all that she could, she was impaled at the mouth of the rift by four sacred stakes. Her sacrifice, combined with the pain she took into her heart and her body, would pacify the rift, holding it closed and keeping it from spreading into the realm of the living. The rituals were supposedly successful for a very long time. Rei and Kei both said they found dozens of 'sleeping' priestesses on the very edge of the rift, deep in a secret shrine at the heart of the Manor of Sleep."

Miu has her nose scrunched in discomfort and disdain. "That's...awfully familiar sounding..."

Mio nods. “The final priestess to undergo this ritual was named Reika, a young woman who lived a deeply tragic life. Like her predecessors, she was inscribed with the pain of many, many people, taking it all in as blue tattoos engraved across her entire body.”

"That... almost sounds like Glancing. A different method but a similar outcome." Hisoka mutters sadly. She's given Yuri the Hinasaki hair ornament to hold, taking a break from the pull of its shadows to clear her mind. Yuri has been very carefully toying with it between her fingers as she listens, brushing over the shadows to orient herself with where they'll head next. It's different with the bracelet, requiring more and less effort in different ways. "But it also sounds more painful. Both a physical and a spiritual torment."

Mio seems to have already reached the same conclusion. "Honestly, I think it was Rei's Glancing ability that finally put Reika's soul to rest. Rei didn't know what it was at the time, but she says she remembers feeling as though she was sharing Reika's pain, and in doing so, easing the grief resonating between them."

"What happened to her?" Miu asks, stealing back Mio's attention. "Reika, I mean. What caused the curse to form and the rift to spread?"

"The violent murder of her lover."

Miu, Hisoka, and Yuri all share a deadpan look.

Stifling a small, bittersweet smile of amusement at the younger girls' unimpressed but unsurprised reaction, Mio continues, "After Reika had accepted her fate and allowed herself to be impaled, her soul was to remain trapped in dreams, doomed to wander lost in the rift forever. Her lover, however, found out about her impending fate and rushed to save her. His younger half-sister, a young girl living at the Kuze shrine at the time– the only handmaiden directly tied to the Kuze bloodline– helped him get inside, sneaking him into the most sacred areas where men were forbidden from entering and where Reika was being held."

"So wait," Miu has more questions, "his sister lived at the shrine? But he didn't? Wasn't he from the Kuze bloodline too?"

"I'm getting there, give me a second," Mio huffs a soft laugh at her impatience, still doing her best to explain as promised. "I told you, it's all a little complicated. Men weren't required at the Kuze Shrine, aside from, uh...the occasional need to...continue the bloodline..." She waves her hand awkwardly and moves on. "They were only permitted to enter the shrine at a certain time of the year, and even then, were strictly forbidden from entering the vast majority of it, especially the secret shrine where the rituals took place and the opening to the rift resided. Reika's lover, Kaname, was a son born to the daughter of the Kuze Family Head. In order to keep him alive, his mother smuggled him down to the nearby village as a toddler, where he eventually grew up, raised by a different family and unaware of his true lineage. The Kuze Family Head knew what her daughter had done but feigned as if she didn't to spare her daughter heartache and her grandson's life."

"Hmph. That's..." Miu narrows her eyes suspiciously, "uncommonly merciful."

Mio gets a look on her face, her small smile turning sardonic. "Considering she murdered her daughter's lover– Kaname's father– for conspiring to rescue her, and then later, proceeded to murder her own grandson for repeating the sins of his father, maybe not so much..."

"Ah..." Miu rolls her eyes. "There it is..."

Mio hums in agreement with her sentiments. "The little handmaiden, Amane, tended to Reika as Reika was receiving her tattoos. In their time together, they grew close and Reika often confided in her, particularly about the man she loved in the village she once lived. Amane managed to deduce that it had to be her half-brother, who her mother had told her about in secret. Wanting to help them meet one last time, she broke the Kuze Family code and snuck him inside. Unfortunately, doing so was the downfall of all of them." She sighs, staring up at the soft blues in the clear sky above them. "The Kuze Family Head found out. She pursued Kaname to the edge of the rift where the tattooed priestesses were impaled, but it was already too late. He woke a sleeping priestess. Reika woke from her endless nightmare in time to see him violently murdered by the Kuze Family Head. Her grief and distress caused the ink to spread to her eyes, cursing her and anyone she touched to feel her agony until the tattoos eventually consumed them too. The rift spread, swallowing the Kuze Shrine and any soul left inside to create the Manor of Sleep, an endlessly expanding labyrinth that took on the memories of its visitors to create its ever-changing appearance."

"So that's why it looked different in Mama's memories," Miu mutters thoughtfully, a look in her eyes as if she's recalling the strange amalgamation of rooms she saw during her "accidental" glancing.

Mio nods again, confirming her realization. "Before everything was consumed, the Family Head tried several other means to contain the rift. She contacted shrine carpenters to have the secret shrine sealed away and then had them all slaughtered to fortify the walls and sealing wards. She even commanded the impaling of three of the four young handmaidens– her granddaughter, Amane, included. The final handmaiden was consumed by the rift all alone after impaling all of her friends. They were just kids…" she shakes her head, her fury burning brightly in her eyes. "But it wasn't enough. The rift kept spreading. And the more it spread, the more souls it drew in and consumed."

Yuri frowns. "You learned all of this while you were there?"

Mio gives her a wistful smile. "No. I learned most of it from Rei in the time after we were set free. She and my uncle figured it out while they were trying to break the curse. I... don't actually remember a lot of my time there." She shrugs, her gaze falling to the dirt beneath her feet. "I was... too focused on something else... to pay much attention…"

"Amane..." Miu's mind is still wandering, lost in her thoughts. She's muttering them aloud. "That's the little girl who was influencing my mom when she was cursed."

Mio's gaze snaps back to her. "Yep. She could sense that Miku's pain and grief were very similar to her own– they both lost their beloved older brothers. Amane knew that if anyone was going to understand, it was going to be Miku. So she reached out to her, begging for her help. Her desperation combined with Miku's sensitive psychic senses began to negatively affect Miku, taking a toll on her body and mind. She was acting like she was possessed,

constantly shivering and spaced out, even during the day. After a while, Rei said that she couldn't tell if any of Miku's actions were her own or if they were all driven by Amane's influence over her."

"Which is why she chased my uncle deeper into the Manor even though she said that she didn't want to, even though she wanted to wake up and return to Mama." Miu nods, at last putting the missing pieces together. Her eyes are shining with determination, finally making sense of things. "Mama chased after her, trying to save her, and then..."

"Their souls intertwined." Mio's smile finally softens, turning fond again.

"And they created you," Hisoka finishes, her eyes awfully bright with affection as well.

For a split second, Miu looks as if she's going to get defensive again, as if she thinks they're somehow teasing her. She stops though, taking in their expressions and feeling their sincerity. Slowly, she relaxes. The longer their soft attention is focused on her, the pinker she turns, until finally she huffs, waving her hands around in annoyance. "Okay, okay, are we ready to keep going?"

They all just chuckle at her before shifting, bracing themselves to delve back into the memories here, in the mansion. Yuri hands their token back to Hisoka with the utmost care, and then together, they start back on Miku's trail.

It's close by. Yuri could sense it from the token. Another door bearing the shattered Himuro crest in some sort of strange locking mechanism awaits them on the other side of the veranda. Miku stopped briefly by the grave and then made her way to the door before proceeding through.

"Well, isn't this a cheerful place," Miu quips as they step inside. It almost appears to be a sanctum of sorts; four huge wooden Buddha statues stand in pairs on either side of the room, stained with red grime that drips from a dark line wrapped tightly around their necks.

"Places like this tend to be riddled with them." Mio mutters, pointing the spirit flashlight towards one of the statues. Each appears to have a different damaged limb as well, much like the much smaller ones in the forest shrine.

At the end of the room is a large altar. It appears to have been closed up at some point, with something hidden inside. Now, it remains open and empty, save for decades of dust and the occasional spider. Eyeing it warily, Yuri fights off a shudder. So much of the mansion reminds her of the various shrines on Mt. Hikami– the basement Shrine of Dolls, the casket room at the Shrine of the Ephemeral, the various tunnels and claustrophobic cave systems. The sanctum at the Shrine on the Water. The Shadowspring itself. They all feel exactly the same: foreboding and deeply unnatural, existing right in the fringes of the netherworld. This place is no different, complete with the air of mystery and danger lurking around every bend.

"Yuri..." Hisoka is staring down at the low offering table in front of the altar, oblivious to Yuri's growing unease in her deeply focused state. "Do you sense something here too?"

Yuri tilts her head, looking at her curiously, before setting her focus on the offering table as well. Pushing past the bracelet, she scans through the shadows, brushing them aside to seek what Hisoka is sensing.

Hisoka's right. There's something there, half pulled into the world of the unseen.

Finally, a use for the Camera Obscura.

Raising the camera, Yuri looks through the viewfinder, preparing to snap a psychic exposé. Before she can, the sound of a shutter clashing somewhere behind her startles her. She whips around towards it, only to find her vision has greyed, and–

Miku is in the midst of battle again, fending off her attacker with her own Camera Obscura.

The folklorist's spirit has been corrupted like all the others. He's lashing out, clawing and lunging at Miku, trying to drag her into joining them in their suffering.

"The mask... Where's the mask...?"

Miku is becoming quite masterful with the spirit camera, stepping back and firing in time to drive him away each time he pushes forward. Occasionally, he'll temporarily disappear before reappearing right behind her. Each time he does, she's quick in whipping around, catching him in film before he can catch her.

Before long, the intense battle is over. He doesn't shrink down to be absorbed by the Camera Obscura, however. He merely vanishes, causing the filament to dim and the room to fall still and silent.

Miku lets out a shaking exhale, her shoulders dropping again– this time, in exhaustion. She's been fighting for a while now. It's taking a toll.

When it's clear that the danger has passed, she steps forward towards the offering table to retrieve something lying innocuously on top of it. It appears to be a traditional Noh mask, white and expressionless, but there's something that's off about it. The mask almost seems to shift in her hands, drastically changing its expression in the shadows, morphing in the low light around her. It's very strange. Yuri can tell Miku doesn't know what to make of it either.

Regardless, she takes it with her. With it safely in hand, she turns to backtrack the way she came, and–

Yuri blinks again. The echo has ended. The others are shifting around her, rubbing their eyes as if it had caught them off guard too.

Recalling what she was doing before her attention was stolen away, she turns her gaze back towards the offering table. Raising the camera, she finally brings the object in the shadows back to the world of the living.

The shutter snapping causes the others to jump, still steadying themselves from the unexpected echo. She gives them a small, crooked grin, bowing her head apologetically. They

all easily forgive her, returning her smile as they relax. Miu can't help but offer a fond eye roll along with hers.

Then, they all look down towards the offering table to find–

"That is *not* the same mask." Miu furrows her brow at the object the spirit camera revealed, resting a little less innocuously on top of the table.

The mask in question has two stakes driven through it, both discolored and splattered with dark stains. The shadows oozing off of it are sickening, much like the ones from the room in the secret hallway. Miu, Hisoka, and Mio all unwittingly take a step back, recoiling away as the darkness washes over them unfettered.

The blinding mask.

But what is it doing here? Miku found something else, a different mask– one with a strange, almost blank expression. Why is this mask suddenly in its place?

Yuri hums thoughtfully as she stares at it. In the end, she supposes it doesn't really matter. It's the key they need to open the gate at the Demon Mouth. Its presence here just saves them from having to track it down later.

Reaching down for it, she braces herself to carry it back–

Hisoka cuts her off.

Stepping in front of her, catching both of her hands, Hisoka lets out a startled noise of protest. She shields her with her body and refuses to move. "Wait!"

"Don't touch it!" Miu quickly objects as well, tugging insistently at Yuri's shirt as if trying to pull her away.

Yuri frowns, looking between the two in confusion. "But...we need it to open that gate. And I've got this, remember?" She raises her wrist, showing off her useful new accessory, the one they insisted she wear. "I should be the one to carry it. I'm the only one who safely can."

Both Hisoka and Miu stare, disdain obvious in their expressions. They're not staring at Yuri though. Their contempt is not for her.

It's all for the bracelet.

Miu scrunches her nose in irritation, muttering to Hisoka under her breath, "I'm starting to have second thoughts about you giving that to her..."

Hisoka bears a grumpy pout, still glaring at the bracelet as she mutters back, "Likewise."

"Can't fault her reasoning though." Mio chuckles at them both. Both Hisoka and Miu turn to her with their own distinct versions of a look that clearly states *please don't encourage her*. She just titters at them again before turning to Yuri. Meeting her gaze, she confirms, just to make certain, "You're sure you've got it? It won't be too much?"

Meeting her gaze in return, Yuri nods determinedly. She hands off the spirit camera to Miu and then uses both hands to carefully retrieve the mask. Carrying it by the edges, she holds it away from her body, trying to avoid the long-dried bloodstains and the sinister echoes pouring from the tips of the stakes. She can still feel them, the shadows dancing beneath her fingers– she can still feel them trying to draw her in. There's no escaping them, not completely. Not even the power of the bracelet can fully protect her.

But it's helping.

She can touch it and get it to where they need it so long as she focuses and keeps moving. It can't get her if she doesn't let it.

And better her than Hisoka or Miu.

Mio must be able to feel the shadows' nauseating pull too. She drew back and away, just like Hisoka and Miu. And even if she can't feel them quite as powerfully, Yuri is willing to bet the innocent spirit residing inside her definitely can.

She'll protect the two of them from it too.

With the mask safely in her grasp, Yuri takes a deep breath, a slow and easy in and out. Then, staying in the bright glow of the spirit flashlight, she leads them forward, one steady step at a time.

Behind her, she hears Miu whisper loudly to Hisoka.

"You're going to marry that someday."

It somehow sounds like a playful quip, an amused compliment, and an affectionate insult, all at once.

"*Yes*," Hisoka breathes, sounding annoyed by her teasing but enamored by her love's courage. Yuri tries not to preen, a warmth spreading through her chest powerful enough to drown out any oppressive shadow. "Now, hush and focus. Keep the Camera Obscura ready, just in case."

"Yeah, yeah..."

As they step back outside, back into the warm sunshine illuminating the square garden, a brief flicker catches Yuri's eye, just out of the very corner of her gaze. The mask seems to shimmer, flinching beneath the light as it washes over it for likely the first time in decades. For a second, it almost feels as if it's going to change shape, shift into something else entirely the moment she looks away...

Yuri stares, squinting down at it.

Nothing happens. The mask remains unchanged.

Shaking her head, she brushes it off. She redoubles her focus, keeping it fixed on keeping the echoes at bay.

Her eyes must have been playing tricks on her.

***

Returning through rooms steadily growing more and more familiar, they walk the path all the way back to the Demon Mouth.

Yuri remains in front, carrying the mask and guiding them carefully through the mansion.

Hisoka trails just behind her, still holding the Hinasaki hairpin but not currently reading any shadows off of it. They all already know exactly where they would lead them anyway. Her other hand occasionally twitches as if she wants to reach out, as if she wants to hold and protect Yuri as she bravely leads them onwards through the dark. It's with great reluctance that she keeps her hands and her wishes to herself, allowing Yuri to focus wholly on fending off the echoes hemorrhaging from the disturbing object held gingerly in her hands.

Behind Hisoka, Miu holds the camera at the ready with one hand and Mio's arm with the other, while Mio continues to light their way with the spirit flashlight. They all remain vigilant, moving together and looking out for each other the whole way back.

When they arrive at the doors leading to the upper level of the Demon Mouth, they brace themselves for the onslaught of dark echoes, the same ones that nearly overwhelmed them before. Then, they push their way back inside.

"Okay..." Mio starts as they hastily round the corner of the wooden walkway. She steps in front of Yuri, pointing the flashlight towards the first rickety ladder that will start their return journey to the depths of the pit. "Let's try to hurry so that Yuri can put that thing down already. Everyone be careful–"

The sharp flash of the echo cuts her off. It catches all of them off guard, and–

Mio frantically shines the flashlight around, trying to find what the shadows are trying to tell them. The younger girls try to scan their surroundings too, but the flashing beam disorients them, muddling the echo further.

Yuri is tempted to squeeze her eyes shut in an attempt to block it out. Between the echoes on the mask in her hands and the echo trying to take shape in front of her eyes, even through the bracelet's influence, she's getting overwhelmed.

Finally, Mio catches something in the light.

She turns to face it in time to find the folklorist's corrupted ghost looming over her, his face twisted into a scowl of anger and agony.

"Yae...!"

Mio cries out, stumbling back and pushing the girls behind her.

Her touch causes the echo to change again.

They're all pulled deeper, tumbling through quick flashes of memory, all warping in and out of shape, and–

–blood, so much blood, a young set of twin girls holding hands, a boy with white hair. Red glowing butterflies flying towards a blackened sky. In the distance, they hear that maniacal laughter again, carried by the wind throughout a lost village, abandoned, trapped inside an endless night, and–

Mio growls, shaking her head in frustration as if trying to get the images out of her head.

The vision begins to collapse.

It changes back to what's right in front of them: the Demon Mouth, the folklorist, and Miku. Miku's echo stands in front of them again, her stance almost protective. She's fighting the folklorist off, keeping him at bay with the Camera Obscura, driving him back and away from the girls as if she can sense their distress, even from the past.

She ends the fight quickly, sealing his ghost away for good. She turns back to face the girls, looking at them but straight through them, and–

The echo abruptly ends, leaving them panting and disoriented but safely back on the surface.

Mio huffs in annoyance as she's trying to slow her breathing, adrenaline keeping her on edge and sending her instincts into overdrive. The memories caught her off guard again, but this time, she was able to catch herself– and subsequently the girls– before it could drag them completely under.

She's angry and upset but still only with herself.

Miu wraps her arms around her from behind, resting her head against her back. Hisoka quietly reaches for her hand, holding it as they all slowly calm.

After a moment, Mio finally sighs, letting the tension melt away from her body. She rests back against Miu and gives Hisoka's hand a gentle squeeze, grateful for their attempts at comfort.

"Sorry. I'm fine now..." Then she stops, pausing to collect and steady her thoughts. She asks softly, her eyes full of worry and compassion, "Is this... what it's always like for you three?"

Yuri and Miu hesitate, sharing a brief look.

Then, slowly, they both nod.

Hisoka's hesitation is more pronounced. It wasn't always like this for her. She can still remember when it was different.

It is her reality now though.

She finally nods too, averting her gaze to the floor.

Mio looks between them sadly. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Miu shrugs. She's not downplaying it, not anymore, at the very least for Yuri and Hisoka's sake. But she's also unwilling to wallow in self-pity. "It's easier to face when we're together." Then she shifts nervously, wary of asking but too curious to keep her questions to herself, "You've...always been able to sense things too, right? Maybe not the same way we can, but maybe more like how Hisoka could before...?"

She quietly trails off, mindful of Hisoka's memories and feelings on the matter. The meaning is evident enough: before the black water, before she nearly died, before the darkness and the spirits they encountered changed everything. Did what Mio experienced with the supernatural have a similar effect? Or did she always have some sort of sixth sense? Did what happened to her change her? Or was it…

What she lost.

Mio frowns, staring back for a moment before turning her gaze down to the pit below. The pain she tries to hide has returned in her eyes. Yuri, Miu, and Hisoka fall still, nearly holding their breaths as they wait for an answer– if Mio even decides to give them one. Clearly, it's been on all of their minds today.

"I've..." Mio finally starts, "always been able to sense things. I used to brush it off as nothing worth paying any mind to when I was young." She motions towards the ladder. They all follow behind as she leads them over to it. "My sister was always the stronger one between the two of us. Her sixth sense was really sensitive, a lot like your mom's. The spirits…their influence affected her deeply."

Yuri tilts her head. Mio's sister… the one she lost? She catches Miu wince and Hisoka swallow roughly out of the corner of her eye.

Her eyes start to widen as the pieces start to come together for her too.

Oh.

Oh no.

"Mayu..." Hisoka mumbles, looking down forlornly. Yuri can feel her heartbreak. She sets down the blinding mask on the walkway to hold her hand.

They start the descent one at a time.

Yuri and Mio help Hisoka climb down onto the ladder together. Yuri holds onto her as long as she possibly can, their fingertips brushing until Hisoka's descends too far below. Their eyes stay locked throughout the entire way down.

"Mhmm." Mio offers a weak smile down to Hisoka as she arrives on the middle landing. "Her psychic vision was always so much stronger than mine. She could see things before I could even sense them. If she was holding my hand, I could see what she was seeing too. It was like she was helping me, making up for what I lack."

"She probably felt the same about you," Hisoka mutters, staring at her intently as she helps her off of the ladder in return. Above them, Yuri helps Miu climb down. They receive her, and then carefully, carrying the blinding mask, Yuri climbs down herself.

"Maybe." Mio shrugs, her expression bittersweet but broken. "After everything happened, in the Manor of Sleep and um... before... my vision became a lot clearer. When we were searching for Miku, Rei and I could both see things, all of the spirits that still hung around, hostile or not. And you're right. Facing it together did make it easier."

As she reaches the landing to join them, Yuri frowns. Clearly Mio can't see all of the spirits around her.

But the spirit within her seems to want it that way.

Her sister...

They descend the second ladder and at last return to the center of the pit. As they pass through the stone claws, Yuri can vaguely sense another familiar echo reverberating through the spaces in between. It feels like the blinded spirit. Miku must have faced her one last time before finally sealing her to rest with the rest. The shadow has an air of finality to it.

Stepping forward, she places the blinding mask in the keyholes in the wall. As it slides into place, the sound of the massive, intricate locking mechanism begins to churn from somewhere behind the stone walls. The gate shudders on its hinges, shaking loose years of dust.

Then, finally, it begins to creep open.

With nowhere to go but forward, they stand before the gate again. Beyond it, deep beneath the earth, is the source of the fading darkness, somewhere where light can never touch. Yuri can feel how horrible it is even with the bracelet; she can't imagine how much worse it is without it. She steps back towards her people, wrapping her arm around Hisoka's waist and reaching out to grab Miu's hand. She can't do much, but she'll always do her best to protect them and hold them steady.

"Stay close to me, okay?"

Neither of them fights her. Their eyes are locked on the gaping chasm as it opens before them. The abyss inside stares right back.

In the back of her mind, Yuri almost feels that faint fluttering again, quick but soft like delicate butterfly wings. The color red flickers in her vision, almost undetectable in the darkness. She glances over at Mio, standing on Miu's other side. Mio's focused on the oppressively black tunnel ahead too, holding Miu's other hand and keeping the spirit flashlight at the ready. She's not the one doing it– at least not consciously. Yuri wonders if she can see it too.

Long, violent claw marks scar the inside of the giant stone doors. It's as if something– or many somethings– was trapped and trying desperately to get out. The door is open now. The

shadows are far more intense, at last freed from the echo chamber they were long confined in, but nothing else beyond them escapes from the depths. Whatever left the darkness behind has long since been snuffed and silenced.

Before they can step inside, another echo briefly plays out, vivid and sharp with all of them linked together. They see the folklorist again, this time when he was still alive.

His last moments play out before their eyes–

The folklorist stands before the same scene, watching as the gate slowly creeps open. It happens so quickly; if they blinked, they would have missed it.

The malice shoots out from the darkness. The hands of countless spirits torn apart engulf him, subjecting him to their pain. His screams fill the air, reverberating off the ceiling and down the cavern as he's dragged into its depths.

Then the screaming stops.

The only sound remaining is the grinding of the gate as it finishes opening on its track–

As quickly as it began, the echo ends.

The gate has finished moving.

Beyond it is a cave that winds deep underground, barely intact. It looks like it's nearly collapsed, filled with rubble and debris left to rot.

Yuri can feel many things through the hold she has on the people she loves.

There's an assortment of fear, worry, apprehension, anxiety, sympathy, empathy, and morbid curiosity coursing through them, making them all tremble and sweat. They're scared but courageous, ready to finish unfolding this mystery, to put it to rest in their hearts and minds for good.

There's sorrow there too. Deep and painful, steeped in devastated realization. It catches her off guard.

It's coming from Miu.

Miu presses herself a little closer to her, unconsciously seeking comfort. "They died so violently," she whispers, her voice shaking. There are tears brimming in her eyes as she blinks, staring vacantly into the void. "So many of them."

Her family. Her bloodline. Almost every one of them before her.

Mikoto had Miku's hairpin. It was passed down to her through generations. The folklorist and his wife died here. Mafuyu died here.

This place is her family's tomb.

Yuri doesn't say anything. She merely leans down and gently taps her head against the side of Miu's. A simple gesture but enough to rescue her, pulling her back and reminding her she's not alone.

The cycle was broken. The two who survived are no longer cursed. They are safe. They are together.

They will remain.

They all walk into the darkness together, watching for falling rocks and stepping around the splintered remains of torii gates.

It doesn't take long before yet another echo finds them. This time, they see–

Munakata's remains.

They lie broken in the rubble, his face contorted in an endless but silent scream. Miku carefully approaches, looking just as sick and saddened as they all feel.

Then her eyes catch on what's clutched against his chest. She gasps, a sound that her daughter unintentionally mimics immediately after.

"Another piece of the mirror!"

Miku quickly stoops to retrieve it, bowing respectfully to the dead before stumbling back and away. She examines it, holding it alongside the piece she already has. They fit together seamlessly.

Suddenly, Miku tenses, sensing something materializing behind her. They all quickly turn with her, following her gaze to find the woman in the white kimono again, staring darkly down at Miku.

"Kirie..." Miku whispers, staring fearfully back.

Yuri's jaw nearly drops.

This woman and the little girl, both in white kimonos. They're both Kirie?

Kirie and the malice writhing behind her... They're blocking the entrance. The only way Miku can go is forward, further into the darkness and down the path. She tries to run but doesn't make it far. A large crowd of tormented souls appears in front of her, setting their sights on her to attack.

There's nowhere to go.

She's trapped.

Miku turns around again, only to find Kirie has already caught up. The spirit looms over her, watching patiently like a predator toying with its prey.

Then, she lunges, reaching down for her.

Miku cries out, flinching away–

The echo burns white in their eyes.

Then it's over.

Chapter End Notes

Finally made it to the end of Demon Tag!

Poor Miu. Her bloodline really does seem as if it had been cursed. Ryokan and his twin, Yae and Sae, Munakata, Miyuki and Masato, Mafuyu... Such horrible ends for all of them.

Well, thankfully, they're not cursed anymore. (: Our remaining two are here to stay. Their found family is going to make damn sure of it...

Thanks for reading! More soon!

Chapter 7: The Calamity

Chapter Notes

> The last two chapters of FF1 are so much shorter than the first two. It almost seems a little unfair.
>
> Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They don't have to search far to find the next memory in the stream.

Miku wasn't spirited away to a different part of the mansion this time. The echoes pick up almost exactly where they left off.

They find her back at the Demon Mouth, lying unconscious on the cold stone floor. The echo revealed that she woke to find more cursed marks on her body, this time around her ankles. The marks themselves were hidden, tucked away beneath her boots, but the phantom ropes had briefly appeared, pulling tighter and tighter before vanishing from sight. It was a grave reminder that she was running out of time.

The Demon Mouth looked a bit different in the echo, Yuri noticed. The braziers standing in the corners of the room, previously long extinguished and destroyed, were suddenly lit and intact, illuminating the whole space in an intense fiery incandescence. The symbols on the huge gate seemed brighter and sharper too, as if they had been freshly painted across the stone.

Miku doubled back, returning to the dark cave path through the gate. She didn't make it very far; the tunnel was blocked by a collapsed section further in. For a moment, in a gap between the rocks, Miku finally saw her brother. She saw Mafuyu. She called out to him, but he didn't seem to hear her.

With no way forward and no other choice, she turned back, only to be met by the little girl in white– Kirie. The little spirit appeared before her again, pointing towards an abandoned notebook on the cave floor– a journal that seemed to help Miku figure out where to go next– before disappearing.

Two spirits but somehow the same person. It's as if the strangling ritual tore her soul in half: one part light, one part dark, polar opposites but both seeking out Miku, one to help and one to harm.

When the echo is over, the girls in the present take all they've learned and make their way back to the entrance of the Demon Mouth as well. The way forward at the end of the cavern path is still blocked– even more so now. The collapse has expanded, growing more severe in

the years that have passed since Miku was last here. Just like Miku, they will have to find another way in.

Hisoka sets her focus back on the heirloom. Just as before, they follow behind her as she returns to following the trace. Yuri holds onto her, keeping her steady as she moves, her concern growing with each step they take. She can sense that Hisoka is getting an intense migraine. She's trying to push through it, trying to be strong for all of them, but the waves are forming, surging closer and closer.

Mentally thanking the amulet around her wrist for keeping her head clear enough to notice, Yuri vows to continue monitoring her, watching over her even more closely as she's reading the shadows. Hisoka's not quite there yet, but she'll need her soon. She'll need her to pull her back, to shelter her from the echoes, to keep her safe in her arms. No matter how badly she wants to help, Yuri won't allow her to get hurt in pursuit of this dark mystery.

She gets it now. She finally understands. She's got to be better about it too.

But she's also not helpless anymore; with the bracelet, she can protect them both.

As they're following the stream, Miu quietly rants in frustration, mindful not to disrupt Hisoka's concentration but unable to hold it inside of her any longer. She's angry. It seems like all of these folklorists grapple with hubris, a struggle that leads not only to their own downfall but also to the downfall of other people around them too– especially the people closest to them.

"Takamine brought his assistant and editor, even though he knew the risks this place posed. Then, their disappearances brought my uncle and then my mom." She's waving the spirit camera around animatedly as she talks, unable to use her other hand to do so as it's currently holding Mio's. Mio has been nodding along, listening quietly but attentively as Miu gets it all out. "Munakata brought his wife and daughter, again knowing the risks, which led to his, his wife's, and his daughter's three friends' deaths, and his daughter becoming orphaned at a young age. All of these people were either maimed, spirited away, or left traumatized because these men couldn't let the dead lie and insisted on bringing them all here instead."

"There is no safe way to investigate the supernatural," Mio reminds gently. She's not trying to dismiss her vexations. She only offers an indisputable truth.

"No," Miu begrudgingly agrees, "but there's got to be a better way, one that doesn't involve taking everyone else down with you." Then she winces, recalling who she's talking to. "Sorry... I know Kei could technically be considered a folklorist too."

Mio shakes her head. "Don't be. Folklore was really more of Yuu's and Mafuyu's thing. Kei only got involved because... well, because of what happened to me..." Her demeanor shifts for a moment again, falling quiet and sad, tinged with guilt. She brushes it aside and continues, "And then we all stayed involved because Miku went missing."

"It's different when someone's life is at stake," Miu argues, insisting with a pout. A lot of the fight has already left her. She was already weary; her ranting wore her out even further.

Mio shrugs. "Even if she hadn't though, I don't think any of us could have lived a normal life after all we'd been through. I think we would have found ourselves involved no matter what..."

Miu sighs, fully aware that it's likely the truth. It's hard to rest peacefully knowing the dangers that perpetually lurk in the shadows. Even if her sixth sense suddenly abandoned her, she's not sure if she could ever walk away from it all either. "It just feels like these folklorists didn't care who they hurt in their pursuit of knowledge or recognition. Not until after it was too late anyway..."

Her shoulders fall. Mio squeezes her hand.

The trace brings them all the way back to the atrium. On the way, Hisoka had stuttered to a halt a few times, looking around and back over her shoulder as the stream looped and crossed over itself. It took a bit for her to navigate the twists, but she kept them moving on the path forward each time. Now, they've finally come to a stop in front of the small shrine across from the cherry blossom tree.

Rubbing her eye, Hisoka lets her focus fall before glancing back at them tiredly. "It looks like she came here first before making her way back towards the east wing of the mansion. There must have been something she needed back inside, but once she got it, she came right back."

She's shaking slightly beneath the strain of the search. Her strength isn't going to last much longer. She's pushing herself too hard, stretching her abilities beyond their limits.

Yuri gently rubs the small of her back. She's proud of her, so proud.

But she's going to need to intervene soon.

In the meantime, Miku came here next. They have yet to uncover why, but she was here. The door to the shrine bears another broken locking mechanism. It's missing pieces but covered in familiar symbols– if Yuri had to guess, she'd say the little tiles that make up the pattern on the door are likely the keys Miku needed to get it unlocked. She must have had to return to the mansion to find a missing piece.

Luckily, time and moisture have eroded the lock, eating away at it until it fell into total disrepair. They no longer need the pieces. With the slightest bit of effort, they push the door open and step inside.

The interior of the shrine is almost entirely barren. Some sort of strange altar sits in the center, the doors to its cabinet open wide. There isn't anything left inside of it. It would appear as though they've reached another dead end.

"Why did she come in here?" Miu mutters, furrowing her brow. She peeks around the altar, searching for the answer. When her cursory scan comes back empty, she turns to Hisoka, looking as if she wants to ask her to pinpoint the next echo with the hairpin– their token would make finding what they're looking for much faster and far less taxing on their minds and bodies than tactlessly sifting through the seemingly infinite echoes.

The moment her eyes land on Hisoka, taking in the way she's exhaustedly closing her eyes and leaning against Yuri, she stops, thinking better of it. Hisoka has done enough. She doesn't want to push her either.

Thankfully, it would seem she doesn't have to.

"What do these buttons do?" Mio stands beside her, pointing the spirit flashlight at an intricate apparatus on the side of the altar. There's a set of buttons on each side, each bearing a different symbol. The symbols match the ones on the doors all across the mansion, both the formerly locked pairs and the hidden passageway secret panels.

Yuri hums thoughtfully as she holds Hisoka, scanning the room as well. There's a mirror on the ceiling. It's angled so that it catches the light coming in from outside, redirecting and shining it down over the top of the altar. In a strange way it reminds her of the mirror inside of a camera. She follows the beam of light down to the floor and immediately notices something else that's strange.

There are scrape marks in the wood.

"It moves."

Miu and Mio both turn to her in surprise. Then, after following her gaze, they share a look and put their combined strength against the altar. Keeping with the direction of the grooves, they push, shoving into it with all their might. The altar refuses to budge.

"Okay..." Miu grumbles when they eventually give up, scowling at the altar. "It must have something to do with the buttons then. Why does it always have to be so complicated…?"

"Probably because of the whole ‘forbidden rituals and holding back a great evil with the blood and suffering of human sacrifices' thing," Mio mutters darkly, her fingers hovering just barely over a set of buttons. She's hesitating to touch them, wary of sensing something unpleasant or spoiling their only route forward. Her expression is grim as she glances back at Miu. "Can't have their sacrifices running off..."

"Hmph." Miu matches her disdain, clenching her jaw. Then she sighs, tiredly rubbing her forehead. "So, we need to find some sort of code...?"

"The echoes should tell us." Yuri has her hand hovering near the altar too, feeling for the mess of shadows surrounding it. She's already done a little bit of sifting, and she thinks she can find the right ones...

Hisoka makes a small sound of protest, opening her eyes and lifting her head to scrunch her brow at her worriedly.

Yuri smiles. Before she can stop herself, she reaches out to tuck a stray strand of hair out of Hisoka's eyes, whispering soothingly, "It's fine, I can handle it."

Miu lets out a small grumble of protest as well. She shakes her head, stepping forward to stand beside them. "Maybe I should–"

Yuri cuts her off. She playfully jangles the bracelet around her wrist in front of her with a cheeky smirk.

Swatting at her hand, Miu growls at her. "Ugh, you're such a doofus! Fine, you do it then." She folds her arms and sulks. Then, slowly, her demeanor and tone soften again as she makes a simple muttered plea, "Be careful..."

Yuri nods, grateful, as always, for her care. It's not always gentle, but it's always genuine. Mio comes to stand with them too, nodding to her in encouragement. Then, Yuri turns and sets her focus on the altar.

It's a little more difficult without Hisoka's gentle guidance lighting her way. The bracelet is doing its job, filtering out the stray echoes, the memories and emotions, sheltering her from getting overwhelmed in the storm. With just a little more effort, a little more concentration, she can feel what she's searching for, skimming across her mind as she reaches into the stream. It feels sort of like tuning an old radio, listening for the perfect moment when the signal is at its strongest. Her fingers trace the wood and metal, brushing back through centuries of shadows and wear, until finally–

She's got it. It's in her grasp.

She grins at Hisoka. Hisoka beams back, pride bright in her eyes. Curling back into her side, Hisoka reaches for Miu and tugs her closer, bracing for the echo. Miu grabs Mio's hand, making sure she doesn't get left behind, and then, together, they see–

A priest bursting through the doors of what appears to be the room with the huge Buddha statues. He's frantic and terrified, glancing back over his shoulder and fleeing from something close in pursuit.

The Himuro Family Master appears in the doorway behind him, a razor-sharp blade held high over his head. The eyes of the demon mask he bears almost appear to be glowing. A spectral evil is rolling off of him in waves. The malice has corrupted him.

The priest turns away, trying desperately to escape. It's already too late– the Master is upon him. The blade comes down, splitting the priest's back clean open. He falls to the ground, writhing in pain.

Slowly stepping forward, the Master places a foot on his head, holding it firmly in place. The blade is raised and comes down once more, ending his struggle with a swift strike to the neck, a slice that severs all the way through.

The echo flashes, each time showing a different priest, all meeting the exact same fate. The Master slaughtered them all– all four. They're buried in separate graves, scattered across the mansion: one in the square garden, one in the atrium, one in the backyard, and one far out on the lake at the very end of the pier.

Their secrets died and were buried with them.

Time passes, seasons speeding by at a dizzying rate. The echo only slows when Miku appears.

She's searching for the code too, facing the hostile spirit of each priest, one by one. Each laments something as she arrives at their final resting places, their echoes whispering to her their pasts, revealing their regrets, disclosing details of the Calamity, things that haunted them in their final days:

"'Rope Shrine Maiden,' eh? Her only purpose is to die."

"He went insane. He began to murder every person in his sight."

"When the Calamity comes, we're all dead!"

"Kirie! Why did you become attached to this world? You'll only suffer!"

"We must seal it again. Before it's too late!"

"The ritual has failed! It's all over!"

In death, however, their ghosts are all searching, obsessed with just one thing:

"Where's…

…my…

…HEAD?!"

Miku faces off with each vengeful spirit. As she seals each of them in turn, Yuri sees the flash of a symbol, each corresponding to a priest and a cardinal direction.

The code, the priests were giving Miku the code, showing her the way forward, and–

With the bracelet's help, Yuri changes the station, pulling them all from the echo. The other three women jolt in surprise, shaking themselves out of the memories as they suddenly dissipate around them.

Miu crosses her arms scoldingly again, glaring up at Yuri with a scowl. "Yuri, what the hell?"

"Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to..." Yuri winces sheepishly, steadying Hisoka. Hisoka sighs at her, shaking her head, but there's still a small smile and a few soft giggles slipping through. She's okay. And she forgives her. She knew what she was getting into when she fell for her. Yuri wants to kiss her *so bad*. "Well, I did, but I didn't mean to do it so abruptly. I saw the code. I didn't want to get distracted and forget."

Miu huffs at her but drops her annoyance with a fond eye roll. "So typical..."

"You caught it through all of that?" Mio gapes at her, eyebrows raised in surprise. She's impressed but also baffled and still a little disoriented. They've all got a bit of whiplash. "It

was all happening so fast..."

Yuri nods eagerly, offering a smile and a brief apologetic bow. "Yeah, I've got it." When Mio chuckles and waves her off in forgiveness, she excitedly motions to the altar. "Alright, everyone take a side." They all shift to stand around the altar, moving until each is positioned in front of a set of buttons. Yuri stands at the south side, knowing it's first in the sequence. "Okay, it goes counterclockwise starting here. So, I'll hit the first button, Hisoka will hit the second, Mio will hit the third–"

"And I'll hit the last one. Got it." Miu nods in understanding, her hand hovering above the last button on her side. "Wait, do they need to be pushed at the same time?"

Yuri blinks at her blankly, her mind scrambling.

She didn't see anything about that in the echo.

Miu rolls her eyes again, still fond but annoyed again too. "Ugh, fine. Let's just do it anyway. On the count of three. One... Two... Three!"

They all push down on their corresponding buttons.

The altar jerks forcefully.

Crunching and groaning as if the mechanism moving it is going to break or catch at any second, the pedestal in front of Yuri sinks down before slowly rising back up again, this time slightly higher. It grinds to a halt and falls still as if waiting for something else, something more, leaving them standing confused in a cloud of stale-smelling dust. They wave the cloud away, hiding in their shirts and trying not to breathe it in, and when it finally settles, they all gather around Yuri again to examine what was just revealed.

"Well, that did... something," Mio mutters, staring down at the raised pedestal. She turns her curious gaze back to Yuri. "Now what? Did you see anything else?"

Yuri shakes her head, crouching down and squinting at the altar. The only thing revealed was a small square opening on the front of the pedestal; it looks like something fits inside. "It's missing something..." She hums thoughtfully and then perks up in realization. "The Master's symbol. These symbols must represent the four priests. They're on all the doors and behind the masks in the secret hallway. But one’s missing. It has to be the Master's."

"The man with the demon mask?" Miu scrunches her nose in contempt.

Yuri nods. She reaches out to touch the square opening, running her fingers along the interior of its frame. Through the shadows, it feels like Miku must have done the same, trying to uncover the mystery behind the pedestal. She can almost hear the sound of the Camera Obscura's shutter snapping as it captured the psychic photo in film, revealing the altar's secrets, and–

She looks down. Her whole body jolts.

There's a dark trail leading from the altar, vapors seeping and rolling across the floorboards like fog over a creek. It leads off behind them, flowing out the door and down the steps of the shrine.

Slowly, Yuri rises to her feet. Staring grimly ahead, she steps forward, cautiously following the faint trail back towards the mansion.

"This way."

"Yuri, wait." Hisoka tries to catch her but wobbles, unable to move quickly in her current state.

Yuri immediately turns and catches her, cradling her tightly against her. "Easy..."

Hisoka shudders. Then, she blinks. Her eyes widen in shock as she stares down at the trail, materializing in her vision as Yuri holds her. With their psychic senses intertwined, the imprint sharpens, growing more vivid and intense. The trail starts to appear denser, looking a lot less like fog and a lot more like...

Blood.

"Wait, what are you two seeing?" Miu is clearly trying to sift through the echoes but hasn't landed on the right one yet. She starts to reach for Yuri's hand, trying to catch a glimpse. At the last second– her fingers hovering mere millimeters from Yuri's arm– she hesitates, recalling Hisoka's weakened state.

Slowly, she lowers her hand.

Miu and Yuri share an intense look. Miu nods. She trusts Yuri. She doesn't need to see what they're seeing. Yuri knows the way.

Lovingly ignoring Hisoka's weak grumbles of protest as she clings to her hand and frets, Yuri guides them, following the trail.

The splattered droplets and long smears lead them back through the burial room and then the rectangular hallway, staining the floor all the way to an imposing Grand Hall. The room is huge, complete with several painted sliding doors, a small family shrine, and tatami from wall to wall. Like other places in the mansion, it must have been an impressive sight to see at one point, filled with life and the mingling voices of family, friends, and visitors from far-off places– people who might never have known the dark secrets of the mansion, concealed far beneath its foundation. Now, it's just eerie and haunted, filled only with the echoing reminders of violence and anguish.

Yuri's eye is drawn to a dim shine in the corner of the room. The beam of the flashlight is catching on something, causing the light to reflect back. She crouches down, taking a closer look, and finds her heart sinking again, heavy and sick with dread and recognition.

More black shards, shattered and scattered across the floor.

She picks a piece up. Like the ones in the atrium, she feels nothing from it: no memories, no emotions, and certainly no protective power. Just cold, hard, reflective stone.

Something gentle tugs at her shirt.

She looks up to find Hisoka staring intently at something, the Hinasaki family heirloom clutched tightly in her hand.

Yuri mentally kicks herself. Hisoka must have been searching for the reason they're here, sifting through the echoes again all alone while she was distracted. Quickly rising back up to her feet, she tosses the shard and places her hands on Hisoka's hips, ready to resume her supporting role.

"Miu..." Hisoka calls to her but maintains her keen focus, keeping the echoes from slipping through her grasp.

Miu has been paying attention.

Yuri can tell she saw what she found in the corner. Once again, she can tell she's not happy about it, but they'll have to address it later. Hisoka is waiting on them.

When they've all mentally prepared themselves and are ready to dive in, Yuri reaches out with Hisoka. Drawing the echoes into focus, they see–

Miku fighting once again, more fiercely than she has any time before.

The katana her attacker wields is long and sharp, enough that a single slice could seal her fate. The Master is blindingly fast and entirely incorporeal, walking through walls that Miku must walk around, pursuing her and driving her back each time the camera reloads.

He's trying to corner her.

He's getting angrier the more she anticipates his every move, dodging his attacks and sidestepping his lunges. She's moving and fighting with such grace, grim determination shining in her eyes as she preemptively evades a vicious swing and counters with the camera accordingly.

Still, she's not quick enough.

The Master of the Himuro Family is not bound by the laws of the realm of the living. He teleports behind her. The blade grazes her shoulder.

In seconds, her white shirt is soaked in deep crimson.

Yuri hears Miu gasp beside her. Out of the corner of her eye, she catches her jerking forward again, reaching out as if she can protect her mother.

But Miku fights on.

Her volley of flashes persists, even as blood spills down her arm. She keeps pressure on her wound as she keeps pressure on the spirit, driving him back every time he gets too close again. If anything, her injury only drives her to fight harder, stoking the flames inside of her until they burn away the darkness surrounding her.

Then, at last, with one final shot– a perfect fatal frame– the battle ends.

Miku is victorious.

The Master lets out a visceral roar as the exorcising light of the film tears through him. His soul falls. It collapses down into a wisp and is absorbed, sealed within the camera for good.

In the deafening silence that follows, Miku sinks to the floor, still clutching at her bleeding shoulder. She's panting and shaken, fighting back stressed tears. When she's given herself a moment to catch her breath, she carefully moves her hand, taking a peek at the slice.

She weeps softly, finally letting her tears fall at what she finds.

It could be better.

It could be so much worse.

If Yuri's hunch about the black reflective stone shards in the corner is correct, then it might already have been.

She finally knows with certainty why Miku knows so much about the stone mirrors.

Stone mirrors completely erase the moments in time they protect their wielders from. "It's all the exact same timeline, just cut, rewound, and overwritten. Like an old reel of film." If they didn't, they might be seeing a very different ending to this echo– or at the very least, conflicting echoes, overlapping and fighting to express the one true reality.

There is only one echo here. Only one long continuous stream, whole and unbroken.

This is the only reality that exists. This is the only way things happened. There is only this.

There is nothing else.

Miku tugs the red scarf from around her neck. Then, with her good arm, she carefully ties it around her shoulder, trying to stem the bleeding. She sniffles softly, scrubbing away her tears, before bravely rising once more, ready to face her fears and find her brother.

She gathers the Camera Obscura and steps forward–

The echo ends. They all stand in solemn silence.

Yuri looks towards Miu. There are tears in Miu's eyes that she's fighting valiantly, just like her mother, but she's also bearing a dark scowl. Yuri can sense her distress, but even more so, she can sense her rage.

Miu finally catches her staring, meeting her gaze with a barely restrained furious side-eye. Yuri knows her anger is not at her. She tilts her head, concerned but ready to listen, silently imploring her to confide.

"It's just not fair," Miu finally grits out, her voice shaking with tears and anger. She won't look at any of them directly. "She tried so hard to save him. *Her stupid brother.* She was so young and facing everything all alone."

Yuri's frown deepens. She can't help but think back again to how Miu was when she first met her, back on the mountain. The memories of Miu back then and the echoes of Miku here seem so similar– broken, hurt, and lost. Lonely. So painfully lonely.

"Miu... so were you."

Miu's eyes snap fully towards her. She looks almost indignant. "No. I had *you*. She had no one. And he made sure it stayed that way."

Beside Miu, Mio has that distant and sad look on her face again as she stares at Miu as well. For a moment, she looks like she's seeing something else again. *Someone* else.

Then she blinks.

Whatever– *whoever*– she was seeing, she pushes it aside, pulling herself bravely back to the surface. She pulls Miu close first this time. Wrapping her wholly in her arms, she protects her, keeping her safe from the painful memories around them.

Miu's anger gets momentarily disrupted, turning to utter confusion as her body and mind struggle to respond to the sudden but gentle embrace. An assortment of emotions flashes across her face as if she's experiencing them all overwhelmingly and all at the same time. She scrunches her face up, trying to fight off the tide.

In the end, it's too much.

They overcome her.

She chokes on the first sob.

They all move closer and let her break, gently comforting her as she begins to cry.

***

They're all piled up together when Miu finally calms, hiding from the echoes reverberating through the Grand Hall in a quiet alcove.

They've tucked the youngest among them in the middle, sandwiching her safely between Mio and Hisoka. Yuri sits facing them, resting in front as their shield, warding off the lingering shadows and emotions with the amulet bracelet. Miu has her head on Hisoka's shoulder and her hand clasped tightly in Mio's, still looking a little grumpy and occasionally still sniffling softly but finally calm. It would seem the overwhelming tide has subsided for now.

Seeing her mother this way hurt her deeply. Far deeper than she expected it would. She's been trying to be strong through it, pushing her feelings down and away, but seeing her mother wounded by what easily could have been a fatal blow made it all come flooding back.

Her mother is so brave. So kind and resilient. Miu always knew that she was, but actually getting to see her in action, witnessing all that Miku faced and fought through, all alone...

She finally understands. She's heartbroken but left in awe.

Eventually, she lets out a sigh that sounds more like a huff. She squirms a little in between them, trying to find some space. They all shift around, watching worriedly as she rises back up to her feet.

Scrubbing the last of her tears away as they rise beside her, Miu crosses her arms across her chest again and nods, indicating her readiness to push on. She doesn't want to talk about it anymore. Not here, not now. They won't push her. Mio winds an arm around her shoulder again, and then they turn to walk back towards the shrine in the atrium, following the stream back to where it leads next.

Before they can get very far, Hisoka stops them.

"Wait," she mutters, staring at the space beneath the small family altar. She looks a little stronger after their very brief rest, but she's still rubbing at her eye. Her migraine is still just on the horizon. "I sense something. There's something else here."

Miu hands Yuri the Camera Obscura. Yuri aims it at the space Hisoka is staring at. In the viewfinder, she can just barely make out the wisps of another object caught between realms. She lines up the camera and takes the shot.

For a brief moment in the flash, there's a massive dark stain spilled across the tatami. A figure is slumped in the middle with what appears to be a long blade run through it. When the flash fades, only a small square seal remains, carved with the symbol of the Master of the Himuro Family and resting idly on the floor.

Mio hums, not terribly surprised but vaguely curious. They all know the supernatural rarely adheres to rhyme or reason. "I wonder how it got there..."

Still staring tiredly at a dark echo pooled beneath the family altar, Hisoka mumbles just loud enough for all of them to hear, "Maybe the shadows attached to it thought it belonged there. Or maybe its original owner wanted it hidden. Maybe he was so ashamed of what he did that he wanted it all to be forgotten."

She doesn't ask Yuri to reveal the echo for them. None of them do. It's heavy with remorse and reeks of blood. They don't need to see this one. They all have a strong enough notion of what it would show them anyway.

They take the seal and walk away, leaving the demon to his demons.

***

Back at the atrium shrine, Yuri wastes no time in setting the seal in its designated slot.

As soon as it's in place, the mechanism begins to churn and grind again. The whole altar jerks and then drags itself backwards, scraping along the wooden floorboards to reveal a deep, dark hole hidden beneath it, tucked away at the very center of the shrine. It looks like some sort of well, except it's completely dried up. Light from outside reflects off of the mirror on the ceiling and shines down through it, piercing the darkness all the way to the very bottom.

They all stand and stare, grimacing as they look down into it. It does *not* look like a particularly inviting place to be.

"Alright..." Miu starts. She'd composed herself after her breakdown, but now she's clearly deeply unsettled again. "Who wants to go in the big, creepy hole first?"

Yuri opens her mouth to volunteer.

To everyone's surprise, Hisoka beats her to it.

"I'll go..." She unfolds her arms from in front of her and steps forward out of Yuri's grasp. She's already a little unsteady on her feet, but she holds out the hairpin to Miu, returning it to free up her hands for the precarious climb down the rickety ladder.

Yuri immediately catches her, her fingers digging lightly into her hips. She pulls her back against her, a disgruntled growl of objection slipping past her lips.

"Nuh-uh, not happening, you are not in any condition to be going first," Miu protests as well, adamantly shaking her head. She pushes her hairpin back towards Hisoka, keeping her hands out in front of her as if to impede her from stepping any closer to the well.

Hisoka rolls her eyes. Squirming slightly, she tries to free herself from Yuri's grasp. Yuri refuses to let go. If anything, it makes her hold on tighter. "I'm fine. I can handle it."

"You're already on the verge of a nasty migraine, do you really want to keep pushing yourself?" Miu hisses up at her. The reproach in her voice is harsh but comes from a place of care. "Just let me or your doofus go and give yourself a damn break for once. She's got the bracelet, and I'm– hey, wait! Mio!"

Mio is already several rungs down the ladder, raising her eyebrows at them from over the lip of the well. The three girls scramble to the ledge, trying to catch up, but she's already descending, spirit flashlight clutched firmly in hand.

"Mio! Mio, wait!" Hisoka cries after her as they all crouch down to follow.

Mio stops mid-climb, fixing them all in a sharp stare. The look alone is enough to freeze them all in place. "*Stay*. If you suddenly stop hearing from me, run."

"'*Run?!*' Are you serious? We have the spirit camera, we're not going to– Mio!" Miu hisses again as they watch her descend deeper in. They're practically vibrating with apprehension, anxious to follow, but for once, they do as they're told. They wait at the top, watching

helplessly as she seems to shrink beneath them, her frame getting smaller the further down she gets.

Before long, Mio makes it to the bottom. She carefully dismounts the ladder and then turns, using the spirit flashlight to light her way. Stepping forward, she disappears from view.

They hold their breaths, straining to hear in the blaring silence.

Then, they hear a sharp yelp from below.

It's followed closely by the sound of the spirit flashlight discharging.

Miu moves first. Setting into action, she scrambles down the ladder with Yuri and Hisoka scrambling close behind.

"Mio!"

The ladder isn't nearly as long as it seemed when they were watching Mio descend, but it's still a bit of a climb. Miu reaches the bottom in record time, her feet touching down on the ground as she frantically scans for Mio.

She finds her instantly.

She's perfectly fine, safe and unharmed, but looking *incredibly* sheepish.

"Uhh... hey..." Mio starts, fidgeting with a crooked, chagrined grin. "Sorry about that..."

Miu gives her an incredibly exasperated look, one that masks her fear and distress. She reaches for the older woman before dragging her towards her to check for injuries. Her hands land on either side of Mio's face. She turns it between them as she inspects her. "Damnit, Mio, what the hell?! You scared the hell out of us!"

"I know! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!"

"Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine, really!"

Behind them, Yuri catches Hisoka as she stumbles off the dismount. With all of their feet safely on solid ground, they turn to look around, examining their surroundings while Miu continues to examine Mio– looking uncannily like her mother again as she does it.

The bottom of the well looks like another cave, perhaps even connected to the tunnel at the Demon Mouth. The section they're in doesn't contain much and isn't very big.

Consequently, it doesn't take long for Yuri to discover what had startled Mio.

Tucked in an alcove of the cave wall is the withered, mummified husk of a woman, clearly long since deceased. She's been down here for a very long time, all alone in the darkness,

bound in rope and missing both of her arms and legs– it looks as if they were lacerated off, rather than separated from her torso following her death.

A rope shrine maiden. Perhaps even the very first, if her presence in such a well-hidden and possibly sacred room is any indication of her significance.

"Yuri, look over there." Hisoka tugs on her, clearly not yet privy to the presence of the petrified remains. "There's a door, but I don't see any way to open it. It doesn't have a handle– *eep!*" She lets out a loud squeak, pulling Yuri back and drawing Miu and Mio's attention to the body as well. They quickly come to stand beside them, examining it with a mixture of morbid fascination and disgust.

Yuri can feel Hisoka trembling against her back as she stands behind her, not quite hiding but shrinking back, decidedly wishing to be literally anywhere else. Hisoka's eyes are wide with fear as she gapes at it, as if she's afraid it might move or come to life and attack them the moment she turns away.

Yuri slowly turns in her arms. She begins to comfort her, coaxing her into looking just at her instead.

"Hey, it's okay," she whispers just barely audibly, taking Hisoka's face gently in her hand. Her thumb traces a caressing path over soft skin as Hisoka's nervous eyes finally find hers. "I'm right here. Just focus on me. I won't let anything hurt you..."

Hisoka swallows roughly, her hand finding Yuri's on her cheek. She lets out a strained breath and nods, looking like she wants to believe her. "I... I know. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I– I was your mentor. I'm supposed to be braver than this. I'm supposed to be better…"

Yuri grins at her dotingly, shaking her head. "Now you sound like me. But you're already being so brave..." She presses her forehead against Hisoka's and whispers even more softly, just loud enough for her to hear, "And I'm so proud of you."

A weak but enamored smile finally breaks through, tugging at Hisoka's lips. Slowly, she begins to relax.

Then Miu quietly clears her throat.

She and Mio are still examining the mummy, politely pretending like they're paying them no mind. Clearly, they're making a scene again. She's subtly trying to call them back to the task at hand.

Yuri's face suddenly feels really hot. Out of the corner of her eye, she can tell Hisoka is blushing darkly too.

Moments like this happen so frequently in their typical Shadowreading outings; they always take care of each other while they're facing the shadows. Taking cases is their job– one of them, anyway. They got used to it, to comforting each other on the scene when something leaves them shaken. It's a sacred ritual that they both take very seriously.

They keep forgetting that this isn't an ordinary case.

And that they're not alone.

They quickly separate, sheepishly nodding and joining Miu and Mio again. Yuri still sneaks her hand back around Hisoka's. Hisoka squeezes it appreciatively.

"She must have been a rope shrine maiden," Miu mutters, coming to the same conclusion Yuri had. She's fighting the urge to roll her eyes at their antics again; they're about as obvious as a camera flash in a dimly lit room. "She must have been special. Maybe the very first?"

"That's what I was thinking too," Yuri confirms, trying to distract from the awkwardness. She clears her throat, subtly fidgeting, shifting from side to side. "She sort of reminds me of the three statues at the Shrine of the Ephemeral..."

"The statues?" Miu raises an eyebrow at her. "I was thinking she reminded me of the body hanging in the well..."

Ah. Yeah, that too.

Yuri quietly nods in agreement.

Then she notices Hisoka looking between them, clearly unnerved. Her gaze stops on Yuri, wide-eyed again.

"The *what?*"

Oh, right, another thing they never told her...

Yuri locks up, freezing as she tends to when she's put on the spot. She's about to start explaining when suddenly everything turns disorienting shades of grey, and then–

Miku's echo joins them.

She's shining her flashlight and looking around the cave, just as they had when they first arrived. Her flashlight catches on something, reflecting the light back brightly.

It's another piece of the Holy Mirror.

It's resting in an odd sort of recess, carved into a raised stone platform right in front of the former shrine maiden. Miku retrieves the piece and then tilts her head, examining the recess. Her eyes are full of unease but also compassion and sorrow for an innocent soul torn apart.

Then, as if sensing something behind her, she tenses up. They're not alone in the well. Something is in the cave with them.

Following Miku's gaze, Hisoka notices their dangerous newcomer first. It's Kirie– the dark side of her, the malice-tainted wraith. The spirit is soundlessly watching Miku, staring from the reflection of a large puddle pooled at their feet.

Miku and Hisoka both gasp at the same time. They both stumble backwards and away as Kirie slowly begins to rise, emerging to join them inside the well. The darkness corrupting her, clinging to and tearing at her soul, emerges along with her.

Hisoka drags Yuri back with her, trying to shield her with her body. Following her lead, Mio pulls Miu back as well, acting and moving before fully processing what's happening. The spirit flashlight begins to charge in her hands, but she doesn't seem sure of where to point it just yet.

Finally turning to see what spooked them, Miu gasps as well. Forgetting that she isn't truly there, she turns back towards her mother and cries out, "Mom, run!"

As if somehow hearing her plea, Miku turns and starts to scramble back up the ladder. Kirie and the malice give chase, trailing close behind.

About halfway back up the well, Miku nearly slips. She catches herself, but the fumble allows Kirie to close some distance. They all hold their breaths, watching and praying that she makes it out unscathed.

Then, a voice and the chime of a bell ring down from somewhere up above.

"This way!"

Miku looks up at what appears to be the glowing silhouette of a young girl waiting for her at the top of the well. It must be the other half of Kirie, the young version that's still filled with light. The little girl reaches down for her. Miku reaches right back.

The moment they touch, Miku vanishes, disappearing in a blinding flash of white, and–

The echo ends abruptly, leaving them blinking and disoriented, standing together in the darkness.

They all turn to each other. Then, sharing a look, they all let out another deep sigh.

The search begins once more.

Chapter End Notes

Hm. "Knows from experience." Seems those stone mirrors really have been saving our protagonists since the very beginning.

Thanks for reading! Stay tuned! We're getting closer to the end (:

Chapter 8: Kirie pt.1

Chapter Notes

Alrighty, back at it with searching for Miku's final echoes at the Himuro Mansion.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Why do I keep doing that?" Miu growls, frustration palpable in her tone. "They're just echoes. They're not real. She's not really here..."

"Miu," Mio soothes, "we've been here, searching through these echoes, for hours. Be gentle with yourself. You already lost your mother once, for a very long time. It makes sense that you'd still want to protect her, even if you're just seeing her in echoes of the past."

"Hmph... I guess..." Miu grumbles, not entirely soothed. "I still feel really stupid. I've been seeing echoes and spirits my whole life. It shouldn't be getting to me like this..."

"You love her, and seeing her like this is hard." Mio squeezes her hand, trying again to dissuade her self-deprecation. "Stop berating yourself for having a loving heart."

Miu merely grunts, stubbornly turning her gaze down to the ground. Mio's lips twitch up into a small, fond smile, as if something about Miu's stubbornness is reminding her of something, perhaps a memory from long ago. Yuri thinks it probably has something to do with Rei.

Actually, she *knows* it has something to do with Rei. Miu's Kurosawa side has really been showing today…

"Miu, listen," Mio leans closer, catching Miu's gaze earnestly, "if you ever start to feel like it's too much... or if the things you sense start to make you feel like you're not yourself... just reach for me, okay? Hold onto my hand, and I promise I'll get us out of here."

Miu's scowl finally softens a little bit, her eyes brightening with warmth and gratitude at her reassurance and care. "Thanks, Mio," she finally mumbles, and then under her breath, almost entirely inaudible, "I'm really glad you're here..."

"Hm?" Mio doesn't quite catch it.

"*Nothing.*" Miu turns bright pink and huffs, trying to shake off the moment of vulnerability. She clears her throat and looks around the well. "I can feel more echoes beyond that weird door over there. Is that the way we need to go?"

Hisoka hums thoughtfully before cupping the hairpin between her palms.

While Hisoka is searching for the next stream of echoes, Yuri decides to take a closer look at the alcove with the former shrine maiden. There's a small indent in the stone where Miku had found the Holy Mirror piece. It looks important, but it's clearly missing something. The only door in the room has no knobs or handles. It doesn't slide open, and pushing on it has proven fruitless. It's as if it's locked somehow. There has to be another way to open it. Yuri has a hunch that it must have something to do with the indent and the missing object– perhaps they act as some sort of lock and key.

Only one way to find out.

She starts to reach out, trying to touch the groove carved shallowly in the stone. Any lingering shadows should tell her what they need to keep moving forward–

She's immediately caught and restrained from doing so.

Letting out an incredulous and upset noise of disapproval, Hisoka winds her arms around Yuri's waist and pulls her back from the alcove. At the same time, Miu catches her reaching hand, holding it back and safely away. They both look a lot like disgruntled kittens, all puffed up with their hackles raised.

"Ew, Yuri, no!" Miu scolds, "Why are you trying to touch her?"

Yuri gives her an affronted look of annoyance in return. "I wasn't trying to touch *her*, I was trying to read the shadows off the indent in front of her!" She motions towards said indent with her other hand, the one not currently held captive. Hisoka and Miu both look down towards it in surprise, as if they hadn't noticed it before. Probably because of the dead body. "See? We need some sort of key to unlock that door. It must sit in that recess. I just thought I could..."

"*Ugh*, nope, no." Miu releases Yuri's hand only to wave her own at the idea, shaking her head adamantly. "Let's just find my mom's echo again. She must have found the key too if she was able to go in deeper. No more touching dead bodies!"

"I wasn't going to!"

"Uh-huh, sure." Miu gives her one last pointed look before turning towards the ladder, muttering under her breath, "Just like at the Shrine of the Ephemeral..."

Hisoka looks at Yuri. Her expression is simultaneously alarmed and displeased.

Yuri ducks her head sheepishly. "I had to get the reliquary key so that we could rescue you. I didn't actually touch it though, really. I just grabbed the key..."

Hisoka groans and lets her head fall to Yuri's shoulder.

Mio snorts at all of them, shaking her head as she follows Miu up the ladder.

With great reluctance, they backtrack once more, scaling back up to the top of the well. When they emerge inside the shrine, Yuri glances over at Hisoka to find her centering herself, taking deep, calming breaths, preparing to return her focus to the Hinasaki hairpin yet again.

She's blinking and wincing in the light, trying to pinpoint the correct stream through the fathomless mess of echoes. As she's watching her, a feeling washes over Yuri, causing her to tense with anticipation. Slowly, she hands off the spirit camera to Miu. Miu gives her a confused look but doesn't argue, accepting it from her without question.

Once Hisoka has the stream in her sights, she braces herself, steadying her weary body and mind to follow it backwards to its very source, where they'll find Miku once more. She takes one step forward. It's wobbling and unsteady. Pushed past the very last of her limits, her legs give out. The exertion is finally collecting its toll. She stumbles and nearly falls.

Catching her just in time again, Yuri scoops her entirely off her feet and into her arms. She's been ready for this. She knows Hisoka has been hiding her exhaustion and pain. Stepping forward, steady on her own feet, she carries Hisoka outside and into the atrium before carefully sitting them down on the front step of the shrine.

"Yuri...!" Hisoka gasps as she clings to her, winding her arms around her neck. "We– we have an audience…!"

Disregarding her protests, Yuri merely grunts, shifting her so that she can cradle her more comfortably in her lap. Hisoka grumbles and then shyly buries her face against her neck. Yuri huffs and shakes her head. "So stubborn..."

Behind them, Mio lets out an impressed breath. "Huh..."

Yuri hears Miu snort before whispering, knowing and proud, "I told you. She's a lot stronger than she looks."

Joining them on the step, Mio and Miu settle beside them, one on either side. Miu digs through her bag for a moment, procuring a few things from its depths before shifting closer, seeking Hisoka's attention. Brushing a few stray strands of hair from Hisoka's face to find her peeking back at her from Yuri's shoulder, she offers a bottle of water and some pain medication.

Hisoka hesitates to take them. Yuri gives her a specific, familiar look. Hisoka huffs and accepts the bottle but merely takes a small sip, just enough to swallow the medicine. The bottle remains clutched in her shaking hand as she finally sighs, closing her eyes and relaxing in Yuri's arms.

As she settles in more comfortably beside them, Miu gives Yuri a smug look. "So this is what all that practice was for..."

Yuri rolls her eyes, carding a hand gently through Hisoka's hair.

Mio just chuckles at all three of them, shaking her head again.

As Hisoka rests and recovers, waiting for the medicine to slowly kick in and chase off the migraine, they sit together in an easy silence, grateful for another opportunity to rest. The sun is still bright and warm, washing the lingering sensations of death and echoing anguish from their minds, steadying them once more. Despite the tragedy the atrium has seen, it still

somehow feels the quietest of all of the places they've explored on the mansion's grounds, almost peaceful even.

Almost.

After a while, Miu lets out a pensive hum, staring up at the torii gates that line the path back to the mansion proper. When they all turn to her, wondering what's on her mind, she speaks what they've all been thinking aloud. "This place would almost be sort of peaceful if it didn't hide such a horrible past." Then she shrugs, idly picking at her fingernails. An anxious habit. She probably doesn't fully realize she's doing it; the shadows have taken a heavy toll on all of their nervous systems. "I suppose Mt. Hikami has never been any different."

Sensing her picking, Hisoka grimaces. She doesn't open her eyes, still too sensitive for the full light of the sun, but she reaches out for Miu's hand. Miu stares for a moment and then sighs, letting her have it. They all know she'll hate it if her nails are ruined later. Especially since she has an event for her idol work to attend soon. Gel and acrylic can only hide so much.

It would be hypocritical for them to scold her; it's a habit they all share. In a gentle attempt to break it, they all make an effort to catch each other before they can make themselves bleed.

"You'd be surprised how often places like this are like that," Mio agrees, staring off at the cherry blossom tree. If she squints, Yuri thinks she can make out a thick scar on one of the branches where it looks like a rope was once hung. It looks like Mio is staring at it too. "Peaceful on the surface but deeply scarred within. We visited so many while we were searching for Miku. Rei took photos at a lot of them. She probably still has the negatives in her cabinets somewhere."

Miu hums again, her curiosity piqued. "I wonder if she'd let us see them."

"I think Rei would give you just about anything if you asked for it," Mio chuckles fondly, "but I also think she'd really like it if you went through them together."

Miu frowns, her brow furrowing worriedly. "Because they might bring up bad memories?"

"No." Mio grins at her, shaking her head. "She'd just really love an excuse to spend more time with you."

"Oh." Miu relaxes, chuckling as well. "I guess I could try and ask her then..."

While they're distracted and Hisoka's eyes are closed, Yuri picks at the knot holding the amulet bracelet around her wrist. She manages to undo it without drawing attention and subtly slips it off. As she listens, allowing their soft voices to wash over her as they quietly converse, she holds it tucked safely away in her palm.

The bracelet has been very useful to her today. She's grateful for its help.

But she thinks she's ready now.

She's ready to face the echoes without it.

She can think of a far better use for it right now anyway. She just has to hope her new plans for it work out in her favor. And that she doesn't get herself into too much trouble for it...

Eventually, their voices fall quiet. They return to the easy silence, listening to the breeze in the trees and the flowing water of the lake close by. Miu holds Hisoka's hand and rests her head on Yuri's shoulder. Mio smiles softly, seeing Rei's daughters piled on top of Yuri, and then leans comfortably against Yuri's other side too, gently rubbing Hisoka's back as they rest.

Yuri is a little surprised by all of it but finds she doesn't mind.

It's nice to feel all of their affection without the risk of being overwhelmed by other loose emotions swirling in the atmosphere. Even tucked away in her palm, the amulet really is useful. They all breathe in together and let out a soft sigh.

After a while, Yuri senses a shift, a lightening of emotion and exhaustion from the people around her. Especially from the woman curled up in her arms. Hisoka must be feeling better.

Slowly, Hisoka opens her eyes.

Yuri is right there to meet her.

"Hi," Yuri whispers, offering a sweet smile.

"Hi," Hisoka whispers back, returning her smile with a shy one of her own.

"Are you ready?"

Hisoka nods, gratitude and determination to push on shining in her eyes. Miu and Mio stand, giving them a bit of space, and then Yuri lifts her again. Standing as well, she sets Hisoka's feet back on solid ground.

Once she has her steady, Yuri holds out her hand. Hisoka reaches out to take it without so much as a second thought.

Without warning, Yuri catches her by the wrist.

She winds the bracelet securely around it instead.

Hisoka yelps in surprise, squirming and gasping. "Ah, Yuri! Wait, wait, wait...!"

Once it's tied neatly in place, Yuri moves with purpose. Still very mindful of its importance, she carefully snags the Hinasaki hair ornament from its resting place on the shrine step before turning and stepping down onto the path leading ahead. The next stream awaits.

This time, *she'll* read the shadows that will show them the way.

"My turn."

"Hey! Yuri!" Miu starts to protest, looking back and forth between Yuri and Hisoka in shock. Hisoka is currently fuming, pawing at her newly acquired accessory in frustration– Yuri tied it *very* securely.

Yuri looks back over her shoulder, giving them both a look, loving but unimpressed.

Mio chuckles softly from behind them. "I think she can handle it, you two... 'A lot stronger than she looks,' remember?"

"We know..." Miu starts to argue. "It's just..."

Hisoka huffs, giving up on removing the bracelet for now. She crosses her arms across her chest and stubbornly avoids Yuri's gaze.

Yuri sighs. Taking her hand properly, soft and sweet, she gives it a gentle squeeze, a silent apology for her protective transgression. She knows Hisoka needs the bracelet now, far more than she does. She hopes, this time, she can forgive her. "Have some faith in me."

Hisoka's gaze snaps up to meet hers, staring into her sharply. Yuri knows what she's thinking without having to hear her say it.

Miu voices it aloud anyway, earnest and adamant.

"We do. We always do. You know that."

"I do," Yuri's lips finally curve into a knowing smile. It's true. She knows. But they could still stand to have a little *more*. "Trust me. I've got this. And if I start getting overwhelmed, I know you're both right here with me. You've got me too."

Slowly, both Miu and Hisoka begin to relax. They share a brief look, one that isn't exactly happy but still very resolved. They turn back to her and nod, vowing, as always, to follow and protect her wherever she goes.

Yuri beams. She wasn't worried.

She always has faith in them too.

Fingers gently closing around the Hinasaki hairpin, Yuri turns from them to stare back up at the vast mansion, a decaying tomb filled with the remains of darkness and violent secrets. She takes one last deep breath, steadying herself. She can do this. She's not afraid.

Then, reaching out with her sixth sense, she calls to them.

And at her call, the shadows begin to stir.

She tries to focus on just the token, on just Miku and the echoes of her past. She tries to block out the rest, but other echoes begin to rush her too, drawn to her like a beacon in the darkness. So many memories are flashing before her eyes, changing, melt*ing, metamorphosizing*–

She can hear thunder rumbling in the distance.

People are running and screaming. Over a thousand souls lost. A woman lets out a wailing scream before plummeting from the balcony. Her neck snaps sickeningly as she hits the ground.

She sees the master as he hunts, slaying the priests and any remaining survivor. He spares no one, young or old, leaving no soul left alive.

She sees Kirie, both alive and dead, standing with a mysterious stranger, somehow familiar, and then haunting, tearing anyone unlucky enough to cross her path apart. Once the rope curse appeared, there was no escape; only agonizing death.

She sees Mafuyu. Armed with only his sixth sense, his wits, and a flashlight, he's searching for his mentor and his mentor's associates in the darkness. He's too late. They're already long gone.

For a brief moment, she even sees Rei. Younger and lost, she's breaking down on the steps of the atrium's porch. Kei rests beside her, comforting her. They sit and watch the cherry blossom tree sway in the wind, the same one they've been watching in their search for the very same person– or her echoes anyway.

The mansion changes and warps with each distinct echo as if it's breathing, healing and breaking over and over. The shifting tide starts to overwhelm her. She holds steady against it, bracing herself by narrowing her focus until all that remains are the shadows on the token.

A small smile starts to spread across her lips despite herself.

She's got it. She can feel the stream.

But it's not here. Miku isn't here.

She's got to go back.

She starts to follow it, taking one slow step at a time as she zeroes in on it, on Miku, tuning out the whole rest of the world. She walks evenly, passing through the rooms of the mansion, straddling the line between the present and the past.

As she does, she finally decides to bring up what she's been thinking the whole time they've been here. She finally understands what it all means. And once more, it all just confirms her faith that Miku was right.

Miku was right about everything.

"It's... It's taking her back."

"What is?"

"The mansion. It's taking her back in time. But not like my stone mirror did with me. It didn't change her placement in time. It changed its own."

"Yuri... what do you mean?"

Shaking her head, Yuri tries to find a way to make it make sense for them. Vaguely, she can feel her body moving up a set of stairs, but she's not worried. She feels safe and confident, and they're almost there. They're getting closer to the source, the very start of the stream.

"Miku was here trying to find her brother. The whole time, she was moving forward in time, following its natural flow. But the mansion itself was moving backwards. It was dragging itself back in time, back to the day the calamity happened. That's why it keeps changing in the echoes, repairing itself around her even though she's still moving forward. It couldn't erase anything; what happened here still happened. So, it dragged itself– or...or the spirits dragged it– back instead. They were calling out for help, searching for someone who could understand and set things right. Miku answered their call. She was the only one who could. That's why the echoes here are different. They were distorted. Because time itself was distorted."

The grey begins to brighten. The stream is just in front of her, it's within her grasp–

She blinks. The black and white melt away.

She finds herself standing in front of the room with the koto, feeling a bit like she's been sleepwalking. It's not necessarily an unpleasant feeling. She still feels strong and in control.

As she's regaining her bearings, she looks down to find a warm pair of arms wound tightly around her waist. Had they been there the whole time she was walking? She stares down at them and then glances back over her shoulder in confusion.

She finds Hisoka holding her, staring back intently.

There's a storm of emotions stirring in deep blue eyes, ranging from fading worry to an increasingly enamored pride. An impulse creeps up on Yuri as she looks into them, returning to her once again. She's been fighting it back all day.

She has to restrain herself from pushing back to kiss Hisoka senseless.

Hisoka catches on, sensing her impulse before it fully forms. She slowly narrows her eyes but doesn't pull away. As always, she doesn't need to say anything for Yuri to know exactly what she's thinking.

Again? Here? Now?

Behind them, Miu groans before clearing her throat, trying to get them moving again.

Beside her, Mio just grins, shaking her head once more. She leans in close to Miu before muttering to her under her breath.

"They're as bad as your mothers..."

***

The trace picks up in the koto room.

Miku had awoken, just as she had each time before, disoriented and exhausted but determined to press on.

Once more, she wasn't alone.

The younger part of Kirie's soul, the part that was still light, stood protectively by, a silent guardian waiting for her to come to. Miku was surprised to see her but remained gentle as she questioned her, wondering who she was, clearly wishing to know what she wanted from her.

The little spirit remained completely silent, providing no answer. Instead, she merely pointed, this time to the dust-coated koto, before vanishing, leaving Miku on her own once again.

Yuri can sense that Miku's trace proceeds forward into what appears to be a closet. When they try to open the door, however, they find it stuck fast, locked firmly in place. They'll have to find another way to get it open.

They all sigh heavily.

Their short rests haven't been enough. They're still exhausted and on edge, and the mansion remains firm in its reluctance to surrender what's left of its secrets. This locked door is just another hurdle to clear before they can finally get to the bottom of it.

"Alright," Miu grumbles, rubbing tiredly at her face. "How do we get it open? I don't see a keyhole, but there's got to be something, right?"

"It must be close by. Some sort of locking mechanism or puzzle perhaps?" Hisoka is running her fingers along the trim of the closet door, searching for something, perhaps a latch or a switch. All she's finding is dust. "I can't sense that any seals were placed here..."

Mio crouches down by the threshold, shining the spirit light onto the sliding track to search for any obstructions. She's peering up at Hisoka out of the corner of her eye, a small teasing smile on her lips. "We could always see if your girlfriend could just pry it open for us. She's proven herself to be *very strong*..."

Hisoka shoots Mio an unimpressed look. She sighs again, rolling her eyes before turning her attention back to the door. Both Mio and Miu snicker under their breath as they watch her slowly turning red again.

"Or we could always just see what my mom did to get it open," Miu suggests, grinning crookedly as she shrugs. She calls back to Yuri without turning away from the closet, "Yuri, can you feel the echoes here? If my mom went through, she must have figured something out..." When she doesn't receive a response, she finally turns, furrowing her brow. "Yuri?"

There's a song burning in the back of Yuri's mind.

She can hear it, ringing softly in her ears as she stares down at the old koto. It's just a few simple notes repeating in an unfamiliar but almost mournful tune. It's strange. She had been enrolled in a few music classes in high school, but she remembers so little, only ever

participating half-heartedly. Right now, however, looking down at the instrument, she somehow knows *exactly* which notes need to be played.

Tilting her head, unconsciously humming the tune, she kneels down beside it. As she settles, her vision flickers, wavering between vibrant color and washed-out grey.

Miku's echo appears, flickering beside her.

They play the short melody together, plucking out the notes with a grace not entirely common for Yuri. When the final one fades, a loud mechanical churning starts in the wall by the door. Hisoka and Mio stumble back to stand beside Miu as the door slowly grinds open on its track, revealing a hidden set of stairs just beyond.

Yuri turns and rises as the door slides open. When it finishes, they all turn to stare at her. She fidgets under the scrutiny before awkwardly coming to join them, returning to her designated place beside Hisoka.

"Well..." Mio furrows her brow before turning back to shine the spirit flashlight up the stairs. There is what appears to be some sort of creepy attic at the top. "That was oddly specific."

Slowly, a teasing grin begins to tug at Miu's lips again. With mischief bright in her eyes, she turns it all back on Yuri. "Oh, you should totally take up an instrument. You could be my part-time partner as an idol. I bet you'd be *really* popular with the fans..."

Yuri lets out a small grumble of discomfort, something between a growl and a whine. She knows Miu is just playing with her. She shakes her head and hides behind Hisoka anyway, clinging to the back of her shirt. "I actually really like my quiet life. And I'm not interested in anyone else's attention. I already have everything I could ever want..."

Miu chuckles, her expression softening to something fond and knowing. She turns to follow Mio into the closet and up the rickety stairs.

Hisoka and Yuri hang back, lingering a moment longer. Hisoka glances back at Yuri, still just quietly staring.

The look she's giving Yuri makes her heart flutter in her chest.

There's a poorly hidden attraction and pride shining in her eyes again. She's clearly not opposed to the idea of witnessing any other secret talents her love might possess, musical or otherwise. But beneath the abundance of warm affection, Yuri can also see the slightest hint of surprise too.

Yuri pouts a little.

She thinks it should be obvious by now where her heart permanently resides.

She's told Hisoka many times that she's happy where she is. That she doesn't want or need anything or anyone else to live her life fully.

So why does Hisoka still seem surprised that she would choose their quiet life together over literally anything else? Yuri knows that she's changed since they first met, but she really hasn't changed *that* much. She'll never enjoy the raucous energy or the tumultuous emotions of massive, claustrophobic crowds. She doesn't need riches or attention or sleepless city lights. She has no interest in a life of glamour and fame.

She finally knows what she wants from life. She's finally where she was always meant to be.

Well, not *here*, specifically.

But with Hisoka, whenever she goes. In her arms. By her side. Helping her run the cafe and their Shadowreading business, chasing off disrespectful tourists and keeping her warm each night and whenever the temperatures fall. It's right where she belongs.

Letting out a quiet huff, she winds her arms around Hisoka's waist, pulling her backwards into her arms, where *she* so rightfully belongs. Mindful to do so before they reach the stairs so that Mio and Miu can't see them, she finally gives in to her impulses, making her sentiments abundantly clear– *again.* She drives her point home with a flurry of kisses, pressing them into everywhere she can reach.

She's made her choice.

It will *always* be Hisoka.

As she's nosing into her, trying to get at the sensitive skin of her neck, holding her in place as she's quietly giggling and squirming, trying to get free, Yuri finally gets the answer to all of her confusion. She can sense it through their touch. It's not surprise that Hisoka is feeling. She's not surprised by her choices.

She's in *awe*.

Hisoka is awed that she keeps choosing *her*, over and over and over again without fail.

Yuri can still sense it. Her self-doubt. The uncertainty. The questions of worth. They're quieter now. She knows Hisoka has been working on being kinder to herself, offering more of the warmth that she so readily shares with others to her own body and mind. Yuri already swore a silent vow to help, remaining by her side through each and every step of the way.

In the meantime, she kisses her.

In the meantime, she digs her fingers into the softness of her hips, skimming her hands just beneath her shirt.

In the meantime, she shows her all of the love that she's so desperately worthy of.

Each touch is passionate and eager but doting and devoted. She hopes with everything she is that someday Hisoka will feel just how committed she is to her choice. She hopes she'll start to believe that she's worthy of it too.

A playful nip lands on Hisoka's pulse point, right where Yuri's lips had just been caressing. Hisoka lets out a quiet gasp. Her fingers clench around Yuri's arms, still wrapped tightly around her.

Yuri grins against her skin.

Mine.

"Yuri..." Hisoka half scolds, half titters, but she's still leaning back into her, a little more inclined to indulge in the affection with no spectators present. She turns her head to finally place a soft kiss on Yuri's cheek before trying to wriggle free from her grasp again. She's nearly successful, but Yuri is stronger and faster. "We're going to get left behind..."

It's not that they aren't taking the profound tragedy of the Himuro Mansion seriously or that they don't feel deeply for each and every soul that was lost here; they feel for all of them with every fiber of their being. Literally. *Exhaustingly*.

They just also need to find warmth where they can, even in the darkness. *Especially* in the darkness. There's no time more vital.

So, for the briefest of moments, they chase the warmth together. The fading echoes have patiently waited this long for someone to find them. Surely they can wait a few seconds more.

Miu, on the other hand…

"Hey, are you two coming?"

It's actually Mio's voice that calls to them first, carrying down from the top of the steps. Yuri can still sense Miu's impatience too. She feels a little bad for making them wait, but she still has her own priorities. She still needs to protect her light. And she knows, impatience aside, Miu will understand too.

"We're coming!" Hisoka calls back as she finally squirms free. She reaches back for Yuri's hand and drags her along behind her.

Yuri sighs but lets her.

They reach the top of the stairs and quickly duck through a door at the top. As they come to a halt next to Mio and Miu, a shiver runs through them as they both look around.

It really is a creepy attic.

Like the secret passageway, it's oppressively dark. The thin rays of light struggling to pierce through the boards beneath their feet add heavily to the eeriness and liminality. It feels as if they're seeing something that's not meant to be seen. A particularly large hole lies in the center of the path forward; it provides the most light, but there's something about it that feels dangerous, more so than just the average physical hazard.

"Watch your step." Mio nods, motioning for them to lead. She lights the way forward with the spirit flashlight from the rear of the group. Thankfully, there's only one path to take. "The floor doesn't exactly seem stable up here."

Yuri and Hisoka nod in return and then do just that. The walkway is just big enough for two people to walk side by side– up until the hole in the floor, that is. Yuri passes to the side of it. As she does, she suddenly has the powerful urge to look down through it, to see what lies just beneath.

She pushes the impulse aside and moves on, stepping past it. Something in the back of her mind tells her it would be a bad idea. She's not keen on the idea of getting a jump scare through an old memory, especially not while she's holding Hisoka's hand.

There's another peephole in the wall further along; Yuri just barely notices it. The room inside has no windows, so there's no light coming through for them to see what's inside.

They can only feel the echoes.

They feel like sorrow. Like great reluctance. Like suffocating fear. Yuri can almost hear soft weeping reverberating through the peephole like the static melody of a broken radio.

She has a hunch. She's felt something like that from someone before, a similar tempestuous mixture of drowning emotions.

Her kindred spirit. Ose.

But even Ose had felt a sense of resignation at one point. In her final moments, the pain and emotions she took in broke her, causing everything to overflow, but even she had made peace with her fate for a time.

The emotions beyond the attic wall do not feel resigned at all.

Kirie did not want to die. She did not accept her fate. And if Yuri knows anything about dark rituals and sealing rifts, she knows that absolute acceptance is required. Otherwise, it's all doomed to fail.

Kirie was just a child when she was selected. She never got to make the choice for herself. Perhaps that's why Kirie's soul split, manifesting as two: one violent, tainted by malice– Kirie's wrath and vengeance driven to darkness– and one innocent– Kirie’s kindness, her sense of duty, her wishes to end the suffering and put things right.

Her soul wanted to choose her fate for herself but was left deeply conflicted.

And so it tore itself in two.

Unfortunately, Yuri knows the suffering never truly ends for these maidens of dark rituals. It can only be eased, mitigated by the company and companionship of another soul.

Miku's brother. Miu's uncle.

Yuri can't say she's never been drawn in by the plight of a lost and broken spirit, a suffering soul crying out to be seen. She also can't say, however, that she regrets the choice she made to stay, for herself and for the ones she loves in the realm of the living.

It's a delicate balance.

In the end, someone always suffers. It's not fair or just or right. But there is still so much they have to figure out here, still so much to uncover.

Like why it had to be him.

They push on.

The next door leads to a room that's familiar: the room with the giant Buddha statues. They're above it, high in the air atop the rafters.

Hisoka is *not* happy about the height.

She clings to Yuri, keeping her eyes fixed solely on her.

Yuri can feel her panting softly, her anxiety spiking as they step out onto the large interconnected grid of beams. She gives her a soft, encouraging smile and holds on tight. She won't let them fall.

Mio doesn't look particularly thrilled about the height either. It's not an exceptionally far fall– it's not a precipice or a vast abyss. But it's certainly far enough for someone to get seriously injured should they take the plummet. "I think I see another door on the other side. Just don't look down. Try to keep moving, slow and steady."

It's only a short walk. The rafters are wide and sturdy. The pairs hold onto each other the entire way, hands clutched in shaking hands. Before they know it, they're ducking through the next door and letting out another collective breath of relief.

The relief is short-lived.

They find themselves standing in a room with a large cage. It certainly wasn't meant for containing any sort of wild animal.

It was clearly made for containing a *person*.

There's a zabuton, an old desk, and a bookshelf arranged inside on the tatami floor. The only light the room provides is through a lone window, positioned directly beneath a torii gate. The opening is obstructed by thick bars, squashing any doubt of what the room’s intended purpose might be.

It's a prison.

The emotions lingering inside the cell are especially potent. Yuri can feel them so clearly without the bracelet. They make her heart ache. There's such deep wistfulness and longing

mixed in with an unfathomable amount of despondence. Someone– many someones, one after another– was kept locked in here for long periods of time with no hope for escape.

Gently brushing over the hair ornament in her hand, she can sense that what they're searching for is close. It's here. She can't see it yet, but it's here. She gently nudges the door to the cage open. It screeches loudly on its hinges but grants them entry. They all duck carefully inside.

"They kept her here? Locked in a cage...?" Miu sounds devastated as she looks around. She must sense what Yuri is feeling in the echoes too. Kirie was here. She was here, lost in anguish and despair, for a very, very long time.

"I've..." Mio starts, staring brokenly at the wooden lattices that make up the cage walls, "... I've seen something like this before. Somewhere else. They kept a sacrifice in a cage like this until it was time for the ritual..."

Hisoka is still clinging to Yuri, pushing through the bracelet, trying to sense and see what happened in the echoes around them. She's having a harder time with it than Yuri did. Her distress at the lonely and harrowing life their dark maiden suffered is throwing off her concentration, making it even more difficult.

She tugs on Yuri, silently pleading for help.

Yuri, as always, is reluctant but acquiesces, keeping her promise. She shares a look with Miu. Miu nods. Then they both hone in on the echoes the cage has held captive for over a century.

Narrowing their focus, they see–

A small girl, bound beneath the torii gate by both wrists. She looks confused and distraught, as if she doesn't understand why this is happening. She had just been playing a game. They told her it was just a game. She weeps softly, tugging at her bindings.

It's Kirie. The young version of her, untainted by malice.

The vision flashes. Time passes.

All alone in the cage, Kirie grows older.

She's been released from her bindings but remains confined. Perhaps her captors believed her spirit had been broken into submission– into acceptance. She kneels at her desk, reading a book that looks as though it's been thumbed through thousands and thousands of times.

Suddenly, she jolts, turning towards a sound from just beyond her dungeon's window– her only access to the world beyond, a cruel taste of what is held perpetually out of her reach. Hesitantly rising, she stands on her tiptoes to peek outside.

She watches for a while, captivated by something, and then jolts again. She stumbles back from the window, a look of fluster on her face. Sinking to the floor, she bashfully covers her face.

What had she seen?

The answer comes as the echo flashes again.

Kirie is in the cherry blossom atrium. She's free, given a brief taste of freedom, perhaps out of pity. Perhaps this is her only chance. Perhaps the ritual is nearly upon her.

She's not alone.

A young man stands beneath the cherry blossom tree, staring up at the bright flowers in full bloom. Kirie tentatively approaches, nerves evident in her frame and each move she makes.

The man turns towards her. They all gasp.

It's Mafuyu.

No.

No, it's not. This man is different. His soul is different. This is not Mafuyu.

But he looks virtually identical to him.

Kirie stares at him, clearly smitten. He smiles softly and reaches for her hand. She shyly accepts it. They turn and watch the petals fall together.

That's why. That's why it had to be Mafuyu.

The echo changes one more time.

They're back in the cage. Miku now stands with them, looking around in distress, a hand held over her heart. She steps forward and crouches down where the little girl had been bound between the torii gate. When she rises, she has yet another piece of the holy mirror– the fourth out of five– and something else, something that shines brightly in her hand, something that looks like it would match perfectly with the shape of the indent back in the well–

The grey dissipates. The echo ends.

"How...?" Miu mutters somewhat distantly as color returns to the world. Her mind is wandering, clearly still caught on the echo and what it revealed. "That... That wasn't him, that wasn't Mafuyu. It couldn't have been. But they looked *identical*..."

"That must be how he survived as long as he did here without your family's spirit camera," Mio reasons, a pensive but perplexed look on her face. "Kirie must not have attacked him. He looked just like her lover. Clearly, she didn't let him go either though..." She sighs, shaking her head. "That man must have been another reason the ritual failed. She was already reluctant, but then...she fell in love too..."

Yuri's hand tightens around Hisoka's. Kirie didn't want to die. She wanted to live with him. Hisoka swallows hard and leans in closer, pressing in tighter against her side.

Once again, an all too familiar story.

"What do you think happened to him?" Miu asks.

Mio answers. "Not to be a pessimist, but given the extent the Himuro family was willing to go to preserve the ritual..."

"They killed him." Miu finishes her thought, her shoulders sagging in realization. "He was a threat to everything they were trying to contain. Just like Kaname and the Kuze Family Head..."

Mio nods somberly.

They all stand in silence again, commiserating the souls lost to such heinous acts of violence– the rituals, the murders, the innocent bystanders caught in between. So many lost souls.

Then suddenly Miu's brow furrows deeper. She looks over at Hisoka, confused. "Wait... Didn't something similar happen to Ren?"

Hisoka glances at Yuri, who nods, before turning back to Miu. "Ren supposedly looks a lot like Dr. Asou. He's his descendant, of course, so it makes sense, but the resemblance is apparently uncanny..."

"Ose knew Ren wasn't really him though..." Yuri adds. "I'm not sure if Shiragiku did at first, but Ren said she did in the end. He thinks it's part of why she let him go too..."

"Something similar happened to my uncle as well," Mio offers thoughtfully, explaining, "Kaname's father, Kashiwagi Akito, was a folklorist studying the lullaby of the Kuze Shrine handmaidens. He fell in love with the daughter of the Kuze Family Head, the mother of Kaname and Amane. He tried to rescue her, only to die at the hands of the Kuze Family Head. As far as we know, there is no relation, but like with Ren and Mafuyu, the resemblance between him and my uncle was apparently uncanny…"

They all furrow their brows, staring at each other for another moment.

Finally, Miu breaks the silence again, perturbed. "Huh. Again, weird."

"Maybe sometimes echoes run deeper than just emotions and memories," Hisoka offers quietly as a means of explanation for the strange, repeated phenomenon. "Maybe sometimes the wounds are so deep that reflections or even pieces of souls are brought back through other people to set things right."

"Maybe." Mio has a look on her face again as if she's lost in thought. Yuri wonders if her mind is with her uncle. She knows they are quite close; Kei has watched out for Mio for a very long time. He could have made the same choice as his best friend. He could have left them all behind. But he didn't. He chose his niece. He chose his friends. He chose to live on. "It really doesn't seem fair, does it," she continues, a bit vacantly, "that people so far in the future would have to heal wounds they had no part in inflicting?"

Miu and Hisoka stare at her forlornly. Yuri looks between them all worriedly. She tugs on Hisoka. They share another subtle look.

Yet another conversation for later. Or perhaps the same one...

Pulling herself back to them, Mio clears her throat. She brushes it off, looking between them all expectantly, as if asking what it is that they're still searching for.

Yuri nods and turns back to Miu. "I sense something here. Can you see anything through the camera?"

Miu perks up, her eyes lighting back up in determination. She pulls the spirit camera up to look through it, scanning over the confined space through the lens. A small noise escapes her as she picks up on what Yuri had been sensing. She lines up the shot and takes it, pointing the camera down at the ground between the torii gate's posts.

The camera flash reveals a tarnished gold hairpin lying discarded on the floor, returned from the shadows on the other side.

Momentarily releasing Hisoka, Yuri steps forward to retrieve it. She recognizes it. It's the shining object Miku found along with the Holy Mirror shard. It's lost its luster in its time spent caught between planes, but its shape is unique and its adornment is unmistakable.

It matches the indent in the well perfectly.

She's not entirely certain of the fine details of the mechanism, but she'd bet almost anything that this is the key they need to open that handleless door.

As her fingers brush over it, she can faintly hear its echoes. They're growing louder beneath her touch, whispering their sorrows after years of unending silence, of being left behind to decay in the darkness. She feels their pain and lets them speak, solemnly listening to–

The soft, broken weeping of the hairpin's previous owner. The ominous chanting of the priests. The ceremonial bells chiming in time. There's an anxious murmuring. Hundreds of souls have gathered to witness. Their voices swell, filling her ears until they're ringing, aching from the waves of sound.

A loud snap of a lock cuts through the droning as the pin is set neatly in place. The door in the well opens, stone grinding against stone, revealing the cave beyond, a forbidden pathway that leads to–

The pin is plucked from her hand, gently but unceremoniously.

The echoes dissipate from her mindspace.

"Hey!" Yuri protests, quickly rising to her feet to chase it. She reaches for it, trying to get it back, only to find Hisoka holding it further out of her reach.

Hisoka stares at her, raising her eyebrows in a challenging look. Yuri stares back, her own brow scrunched in confusion.

Slowly, Hisoka raises her wrist. The jangling of the bracelet in front of Yuri wordlessly but effectively makes her point:

She's got the bracelet.

She's going to be the one to carry the likely haunted and shadow-inundated artifacts.

Yuri slowly narrows her eyes, her expression falling to a grumpy pout, nearly an annoyed scowl.

That's... not fair...

Both Miu and Mio start to giggle helplessly.

"Ooh, she's got you there, doofus," Miu snickers, nudging the door to the cage back open. "Finally getting a taste of your own medicine."

"That's our key, right?" Mio chuckles as she dips down to step back out of the confinement room. Yuri huffs but nods. "Good. Come on, let's head back to the creepy hole and hopefully get some answers."

Breezing past to join them, Hisoka gives Yuri another look over her shoulder, this time devilishly smug, almost a little haughty, as she brandishes her prize. Her little smirk turns mischievous and amused as she bends to duck beneath the doorframe, deliberately slow, knowing Yuri's eyes are washing over her, fixated on her every move.

Her voice is quiet but playful and husky– even a little bit sultry– as she calls back, "Coming?"

Yuri grunts, staring after her darkly, watching her backside as it disappears around the corner.

Hisoka's low chuckle rings in her ears, making her squirm and scrunch her expression further. "Don't take too long."

...Damnit.

That's so not fair. It shouldn't be so attractive.

But it *is*. It's doing things to her.

And Hisoka knows it.

Oh, she's so going to get her back. The second they're home and alone, she will have her revenge. She's going to take her time, enacting it deliberately soft and slow, so sweet and satisfying.

Letting out a low growl, Yuri quickly ducks beneath the doorway as well, stomping her feet as she hustles to catch up. Adorably and attractively smug or not, Hisoka won't want to cross those rafters without her.

And regardless of her vexations and simmering schemes of passionate vengeance, Yuri would never let her face it alone.

Chapter End Notes

As always, those girls are the sweetest mess...

Home stretch! Final chapter soon!

Chapter 9: Kirie pt.2

Chapter Notes

> Oof, so some of the dialog in the dubbed version of the first Fatal Frame... Yeah, just oof.
>
> At last, the finale. The truth and connections are all about to be revealed... Hope everyone is ready!
>
> Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The trip back to the shrine in the atrium feels tense and unnerving for reasons Yuri can't quite describe.

It's not still because Hisoka stole the hairpin key from her. No, she's setting that aside for now until she can make her plans and preparations at a more convenient and less pressing time. Her unease stems from something else, something embedded in the trace.

Brushing over the Hinasaki hair ornament, she can sense that they're not following the path Miku took, not exactly– they *can't* follow it, the door she exited the confinement room from is presently nailed shut. But she did eventually make her way back to the shrine in the atrium.

As they forge their own path back, Yuri can't shake the feeling of looming danger, like something menacing is slowly creeping up on them from behind. It has her heart pounding and her hands twitching with adrenaline, keeping her sharply on edge. For a moment, it drags her thoughts back to the Shrine of the Ephemeral, back to when Ose had chased her and Miu out of the shrine, hunting them from the shadows until they finally broke free beyond the shrine’s front gate. She has a feeling that if she were to dive into the shadows she's reading now, she'd find Miku in the midst of a very similar experience.

But Hisoka is holding on to her, keeping her steady and above the stream– both by her own means and with the help of the bracelet. Together, they're safe. Together, they stay on the surface. They're going to need to save their strength for where they're headed next: the heart of darkness at the Himuro Mansion.

The Hell Gate.

The feeling of being hunted fades when they finally cross back into the shrine, as if the danger finally gave up the chase. Yuri lets out a small exhale, trying to calm her nerves. It does little to help when the echoes from below are washing over her again.

They carefully descend back down the well. When they reach the bottom, Hisoka hesitates, fidgeting and grimacing as she works up the courage to set the hairpin key in its designated place– in the indent overseen by the dried husk of the ancient shrine maiden.

Yuri holds out her hand, offering to do it for her. Hisoka waves her off with an indignant pout, determined to see it through herself. She still has the bracelet, after all.

Finally, Hisoka steps forward, reaching out with a shaking hand. The hairpin falls into place and they hear a latch click, at last unlocking the door behind them. Hisoka lets out a breath of relief before immediately beelining back to her place at Yuri's side. Yuri beams proudly at her as she arrives, wrapping a comforting arm around her waist. Letting out a quiet huff, Hisoka folds her arms across herself again but gladly lets her chase away the discomfort with her warm touch.

Beyond the heavy stone door awaits yet another stiflingly dark cave path. It doesn't take much to deduce that it's the other side of the collapsed section just beyond the Demon Mouth.

The dark echoes are suffocating. This time, they all huddle close to Hisoka, trying to find a bit of reprieve as they push onwards, carefully traversing a perilous and narrow bridge path. Yuri leads the way, guiding them through the storm with Hisoka's hand tangled tightly in the back of her shirt to keep her close and grounded. She can hear the echoes again, ringing almost violently in her ears; thousands of people walked this path before them, riddled with fear but resolved and resigned, complacent in sacrificing the one for the supposed benefit of the many.

She can feel Kirie here too. Her despair is heavy even amongst the darkest of shadows.

She went fighting. They had to practically drag her, holding her captive with a priest restraining her by each of her arms.

"All I want is to see him one more time!"

Her plea reverberates painfully in the air, even after all this time. It once went completely disregarded. Now, they hear it, loud and clear. They follow it deeper in.

At the end of the path lies another set of stone doors, similar to the ones at the Demon Mouth but much smaller. If the blinding room had been overwhelming, then Yuri doesn't know what to call what lies beyond this. It makes her want to grab the others and run. Not even the sanctum at the Shrine on the Water, the very last bastion before the Shadowspring, had felt so brutally violent. Her entire body is shaking against the sensation. If Hisoka wasn't holding on to her, keeping her steady, she would have already folded and turned tail– if the shadows didn't consume her first.

She looks over at Miu. Miu is shaking as well, tucking herself as close to Hisoka and Mio as possible. She looks terrified too. She meets Yuri's gaze though and nods, ready to see the end.

Matching her resolve, Yuri draws up her strength and pulls. Grunting as the stone grinds along the cave floor, she opens the doors, freeing the echoes to flood into the cave with them. The initial wave almost overcomes them. They brace against it as they step inside, faint flashes of glowing red fluttering in the corners of their vision.

They find themselves in a room of nightmares.

A large stained altar resides in the middle of the space, big enough for a human to lie completely stretched across. It's surrounded by five pillars that rotate, all draped in ceremonial ropes, discolored at the ends in deep brownish red.

This... This is where it took place.

The Strangling Ritual.

It's been over a century since the last ritual took place, but the room still reeks of the iron and perspiration soaked into the stone. There's red splattered across every surface, all over the walls, staining even the ceiling. The echoes feel like they are circling around them like predators, just barely held at bay by the seemingly meager force of the obsidian and metal wound around Hisoka's wrist. Yuri clutches her hand like a lifeline, her safe haven in the storm.

But they're only postponing the inevitable.

Sharing one last look with everyone, she makes sure they're all ready. If they're going to dive in, they're going to have to hold onto each other. Otherwise, there's no doubt in her mind that they'll drown.

Once she's certain they're as prepared as they can be, she begins to focus, calling on the memories ringing in the air like deafening sirens. They're deep, even deeper than the echoes in the mansion above them, ancient and eldritch, going back centuries. They dive into the stream together, and then they're–

Standing with Miku, staring at the altar.

The echo is already dragging them under, layer by layer, echoes within echoes. It's exposing what Miku is seeing as she looks on in horror, the memory that sunk its teeth in her, rendering her helpless and frozen in place:

Kirie is on the altar. She has ropes bound to each limb.

She's writhing, choking out cries of agony, pleas for mercy. The priests and the family master remain indifferent. They continue winding the ropes, pulling them tighter and tighter with each turn.

Suddenly, all sound cuts out from the echo. The ropes reach their end, pulled as tight as they'll go.

The pillars are pushed further. The screaming begins.

Miku cries out, reaching out to stop it.

Miu startles at the sound and stumbles backwards, jostling into them. As they catch her, the echo twists and contorts. It's changing, melting, and shifting into something similar but not the same, a new memory.

On the surface, it looks identical; they're still standing in front of the rope altar. But this memory doesn't exist here. It doesn't belong here. It didn't happen beneath the grounds of the Himuro Mansion, it happened somewhere else, and–

"No, big brother's this way!" A small girl with plaited hair wearing what appears to be some sort of handmaiden's garb is tugging at Miku's wrist. She's trying to pull her back, away from the doors they entered from and towards a set of doors past the rope altar.

Miku doesn't seem to notice. She's holding her head, shaking it as if trying to shake herself free. She looks like she's in a daze. She's wearing completely different clothing. She looks a little older.

"I've got to go back... go back... to reality... to Rei..."

Yuri's eyes widen. This isn't the rope altar at the Himuro Mansion.

This is the Manor of Sleep.

The little girl. She must be Amane.

Amane frowns sadly, looking up at Miku with a look of defeat and despair. Then, without warning, she disappears from view.

Miku blinks and stiffens.

She takes two steps back, stumbling away from the door that will offer her freedom. Her eyes almost seem glazed over, vacant and distant.

Something isn't right.

Another spirit appears behind her– or the echo of a spirit anyway. It keeps changing shape, flickering between Mafuyu and a young man in a dark kimono. The vestige walks straight through the other door, the one that leads deeper in.

Yuri stifles a gasp, realizing what's happening. The spirit of the little handmaiden didn't really leave.

Miku is possessed.

Letting out a small sound of distress, Miku grabs her head again, trying to pull herself back. Then she turns, stumbling again and taking off after the shifting ghost, and–

The echo finally ends. They all steady each other, panting raggedly.

"Everyone alright?" Mio manages, catching her breath. When Yuri and Hisoka both nod, she turns to Miu. "Miu?"

Miu is fighting stressed tears, pressing the heels of her palms against her eyes. She remains silent for a moment, breathing harshly. Then she lets out a strained growl. Roughly pushing herself forward, she stumbles but storms towards the door at the back of the room– the one that sealed her mother's fate.

Hisoka catches her hand before she can get far. "Wait, Miu! Don't let go!"

She's too vulnerable to face it alone. She needs something to keep her grounded. Hisoka refuses to let go. Miu whines at her in frustration and exhaustion but lets her hold onto her, dragging her towards the door along with her. Yuri and Mio chase after them, following closely on their heels.

When they reach the second set of stone doors, Yuri steps in front again. This time, she shoves the doors open with her shoulder. It takes almost all of her remaining strength; she has yet to fully recover from the last echo, still light-headed and shaking. Her body strains beneath the exertion.

She nearly trips, stumbling inside when she finally gets the doors open just enough to pass through. Hisoka and Miu catch her, keeping her from falling on her face. She steadies herself again with her hands on her knees, squeezing her eyes shut as she's catching her breath.

Then, a sharp gasp from behind her opens her eyes.

She looks up to find them standing in a very familiar room: a long hallway filled with ropes dangling from torii gates, all lined up one after another and twisting down the corridor. She's seen this before. She knows it. She saw it the very first time she met Miku, from the memory she saw when they were pulling her from the black water casket.

It wasn't the hallway upstairs, the one near the foyer, that she saw.

It was this. It was *here–*

Miku suddenly rushes past them, chasing something out of view. She's wearing different clothes again, distinct from what she wore at the Himuro Mansion. It's another echo from the Manor of Sleep. It's the echo Yuri saw, the one where–

Rei comes rushing past next, reaching for Miku, crying out for her.

“Miku! Miku, don't follow him!”

But Miku can't hear her. She can't stop. She keeps running.

The echo is distorting, fusing with the echoes already reverberating through the torii gates. Shadows of people, living and dead, are surrounding them, violence and light, darkness and peace. The only things that remain in perfect focus are Miku and Rei.

Miu's hand is still on Yuri's arm from where she caught her. She must be projecting it in her distress.

Her eyes are fixed on her mothers, watching as they tear down the hall, away from her and out of her reach. She can't tell what's real, she can't let them leave her again, she can't–

Miu bolts forward to chase them. "Wait!"

"Miu!" Hisoka keeps a hold of her hand as they start running again, leaving Yuri and Mio scrambling to catch up. They fight through the waves of clashing echoes down the hall to the very end. One final door waits for them, flickering and shifting as they approach.

When they arrive in front of it, everything stops.

The reverberating echoes fall silent. The swirling shadows fall still.

All that remains is the door.

It looks as if it's been crushed. Large cracks span the entire length, compressed to the point that not even air can slip through. Miu blinks, scrubbing roughly at her eyes as she stares at it, trying to steady her weary mind.

She places her hand on the door. Drawing up all that remains of her strength, she pushes.

The door refuses to budge.

"Miu," Hisoka whispers, watching her worriedly. Miu is getting increasingly frustrated. Her attempts are all in vain, no matter how hard she pushes. "Miu, it's blocked. It's not going to open."

Miu growls, shaking her head and trying even harder. It's clear that it's not working, but she keeps trying. As she struggles, she looks up at Yuri, pleading with her for help. Her voice is shaking. The tears are starting to well up again, moments away from falling. "I... I can't... it won't... Yuri?"

Distraught at seeing her so upset, Yuri steps forward. She reaches for her, trying to calm her and soothe her distress.

The second she touches her, connecting the link between them and the shattered door, one last echo takes hold.

The world turns grey. The waves crash over them, pulling them beneath. Finally, they see–

The family master and the priests passing through the door after the strangling ritual, all bearing blood-soaked ropes. They bring them down the passage to one last gate, the darkest of all of them– the Hell Gate.

Binding the door with the ropes, stringing them across its surface, they hold it closed, attempting to seal it.

The ropes buckle. Then they snap.

The hell gate opens.

Malice floods through the cavern like miasma, engulfing the gathered crowd. The Holy Mirror, placed in a pillar facing the Hell Gate, shatters, breaking into five pieces. The whole cavern shakes as if it's at the epicenter of a violent earthquake.

Then everything falls deathly still.

Corpses are scattered across the entire mansion. The death toll is well over a thousand. Those who survived after the initial calamity are swiftly ended by the family master, driven mad by the malice. His life is the final to be taken, ended by his own blade.

The echo changes. Time passes once more.

Miku stands with Mafuyu– his true self, not an echo leading her onward through the mansion. She's finally found him. They can finally escape and leave behind this nightmare together.

But Kirie isn't going to let him go.

She appears behind him. Her arms wind around his chest. He reaches out for Miku. Miku reaches back.

The malice consumes him.

Only Kirie remains.

Through her despair and devastation, Miku draws their family's Camera Obscura. As always, she fights back valiantly.

The cavern shakes around them as they battle. It's as if it's going to collapse at any moment. The corrupted mass of souls writhing behind Kirie flinches and wails with every photo the camera takes. It's working. Miku is driving the darkness back.

Then the unthinkable happens.

The Camera Obscura is overcome.

Engulfed in blinding light, the camera bursts, shattering itself in Miku's hands. The device is left in pieces. Miku is left completely defenseless.

But perhaps not all hope is lost.

The secret behind the "most complete" Camera Obscura lies in its wreckage: the final piece of the Holy Mirror.

Miku stumbles towards it, scooping it up and combining it with the others as Kirie slowly stalks after her. She returns it to the pedestal just in time. The mirror emits a strange light,

filling the cavern until the shadows are all burnt away around them. Kirie reels back as it encompasses her, melting the malice away from her body.

When it's gone, freeing her from her torment and corruption, Kirie, the true version of her, emerges. But she's not alone. Mafuyu stands behind her as she slumps to the floor. Miku jolts forward, catching him before he can hit the ground.

They're reunited at last.

The soft chime of a bell calls their attention away from their relief.

The other piece of Kirie's soul stands before her, looking down at her softly but resigned. The young girl points to the Hell Gate. "Don't forget your duty."

Kirie's shoulders drop. Her head falls in defeat.

Still, she rises.

The little girl begins to glow. The piece returns to its rightful place, completing Kirie's soul once more. She walks gracefully towards the Hell Gate with her head held high.

Then, she reaches out. Her powers finally close the gate.

Sighing heavily, she glances back at the Hinasakis over her shoulder. "My duty is to keep this gate closed." She raises her arms, calling to her bloodstained ropes. They come to her, winding viciously around her wrists like venomous snakes. She winces as they pull, binding her to the gate she's been cursed to guard for as long as her soul can abide.

A great force from beyond pounds against the gate. The doors shake on their hinges. She braces against them, grimacing in agony but keeping it held firmly shut.

"Leave this gate to me. You must hurry and escape!"

Mafuyu steps back towards her, distraught at seeing her in anguish. "But what about you?"

Kirie shakes her head. "I must stop the calamity, or else it will happen again. Don't worry about me. You must go."

The cavern gives one last violent tremor.

Then it all begins to collapse.

Miku tugs on her brother, trying to drag him to safety. "Mafuyu, come on!"

Turning back towards her, Mafuyu gently pushes her back, back towards the entrance to the cave. "Miku... I must stay."

Giving him an incredulous look, Miku flinches and jumps as the cave continues to come down all around them. "What are you saying?"

Mafuyu steps back towards Kirie, looking back at Miku over his shoulder. "I think I can help her. I realize now why I was brought here. I've got to accept my destiny. You go on without me."

Miku shakes her head, tears filling her eyes. She tries to take a step towards him.

The cave finally fully collapses.

Kirie reaches out one last time, her power protecting Miku. The last thing Miku sees before the world goes white is Kirie and her brother as the rocks come tumbling down upon them.

She wakes on the surface, lying beneath the torii gate outside the mansion. She opens her eyes just in time to see the thousands of trapped souls set free, returning to the place they belong. Her brother's voice rings faintly in her ears, one last whisper of gratitude for all she did trying to save him, and–

The end is at last revealed.

Miu, the conduit in revealing it, nearly slumps to the ground. Though weak themselves, Yuri and Hisoka are quick to catch her. For a moment, Yuri worries the strain has knocked Miu unconscious. She's practically limp in their arms as they hold her up.

Then she feels the rage building.

It starts as a low simmer, roiling just beneath the surface, but quickly reaches a boiling point, dangerously close to spilling over as Miu processes what the echo just showed them. When Miu finally lifts her face, her expression is twisted into a furious scowl. It's amplified in its darkness by the blood streaming from her nose, rolling down her lips and off of her chin.

Her voice rumbles lowly in a menacing growl.

"His '*destiny*'? What a load of horseshit."

"Miu!" Hisoka gasps when she catches sight of the red. She shares a glance with Yuri, who instantly understands what she needs. Yuri adjusts her grip to better hold Miu up on her own, while Hisoka begins to frantically dig through Miu's satchel.

"He stood surrounded by thousands of souls who either perpetuated or fell victim to this curse and didn't once stop to wonder if their 'duty' or sacrifice mattered? Their suffering would have been his answer!" Miu's voice builds in volume as she tries to swipe angrily at the blood on her face. It does little to stop the flow. "Instead, he perpetuated another vicious cycle and inflicted it all on my mom!" They try to reach out, trying to catch her hand and comfort her, but she shrugs them off, too upset to accept their attempts. The lingering emotions from the echo– centuries of despair, fear, and agony– are combining mercilessly with her own distress and fury until they're all finally boiling over and spilling out. She's rambling, trying to get it all out before the fire inside consumes her. "And she didn't mean to, she found a way to break herself out of it, and I'm so proud of her for it, but she still ended up doing the *same damn thing!* They all did! Every last one of them..."

"Miu...?" Yuri finally catches Miu's attention. Miu's eyes are so dark, flashing dangerously as she's panting, drawing in ragged breaths and trying not to choke on the blood. Yuri tries to help her with it again, but she swats at her hand. "What are you talking about...?"

Miu pauses, trying to steady herself. She's still clinging to one of Hisoka's hands even as Hisoka is digging through her bag. She unconsciously clings a little harder. "I found out something in the research. About my family tree. I'm pretty sure our family was just... *cursed*... to keep doing this– to keep hurting and abandoning the people who come after us, the people who love us, over and over and over again. And they drag other people down with them!"

She finally looks up at Mio, who has been watching over them, keeping them in the light and chasing off the shadows as they tend to her. The frustrated tears that have been building in her eyes finally spill over. It's not just anger Yuri can feel from her, though; it's sorrow. It's anguish. It's guilt. Miu holds the older woman's gaze for as long as she can before her own falls back to the dust and ashes they stand upon.

"Mio... I found out my great, great grandmother was from Minakami Village. Her name was...Yae. *That* Yae, the woman who hung herself in the tree up there. And she... Mio, she was the reason the Crimson Sacrifice ritual failed. She abandoned her twin sister. She left her behind. To face it all alone." Miu chokes on an overwhelmed sob before looking back up at Mio as if pleading for forgiveness for something she didn't do. "I don't think she meant to, and it shouldn't have ever been something they had to face, but she did, and that's what eventually led to… to... Mio, I'm so sorry."

Mio stares for a moment, remaining completely silent. It's hard to make out her expression in the dark, but she doesn't feel angry. She feels distraught and worried, but not angry. Finally, she reaches out to wipe away the tears from Miu's cheek. Miu flinches as if expecting something else, but Mio is always so gentle with her.

"Miu... I already know."

Miu blinks, caught entirely off guard. Slowly, she narrows her eyes in disbelief.

"You... *knew?*" Her momentary confusion begins to morph back into incredulous outrage. She starts to raise her voice again. "And you still helped Mama search for my mom anyway? For nearly *eighteen years?*"

"Who do you think helped write out all of that research you found above your room?" Mio chuckles waterily. Her eyes have filled with tears too, but she's offering a weak smile, trying to ease Miu's anguish. "I was Rei's assistant while your mother was missing. Someone had to put all of her notes together for her. Organizing really isn't her strong suit..."

"I... But..." Miu is reeling. Mio knew. She knew all along. "How long have you known?"

Mio blows out a strained breath, running a hand through her hair as she thinks. "I don't know. A long time, I guess. Like I said, we found out while we were researching. I... was hurt and angry at first, but I always knew it wasn't your mom's fault. Miku only ever seemed to suffer

from the actions and curses of your ancestors. And..." She shrugs, looking away awkwardly. "I care about Rei. A lot. I was never going to let her face it alone..."

Miu gapes at her for a long moment, still blinking and trying to process through her shadow inundation. She shakes her head again as if refusing to believe it, her eyes moving as if trying to find something to land on that might stop the world from violently spinning around her.

"Miu, listen to me..." Mio tries again, trying to comfort her but floundering in her own distress. She draws Miu's gaze back, keeping a hand on the side of her face to ground her in her panic. "If things didn't happen the way they did, if Yae had stayed in Minakami... you and your mother wouldn't be here today..."

Miu is practically frantic, growing more pale by the second. Her nose continues to bleed. "I know, and I'm grateful that we are, but... *Mio*..."

Yuri and Hisoka are both grimacing as they hold her up, flinching from her intense and unrestrained emotions but refusing to let go. In the fringes of Yuri's vision, the crimson mark on Mio's throat almost seems to be glowing slightly, dimly illuminating the darkness around them. When she turns to look directly, the glow is nowhere to be seen.

A Crimson Sacrifice ritual...

So was the mark caused by the loss of Mio's sister? Her sacrifice? Is that... Is that really the spirit hiding inside of her? They look so much alike, even though Mio is older now. Were they actually twins at one point, like Miu's great, great grandmother?

And now Mio...

Yuri has so many questions. She's trying to keep them to herself. She glances over at Hisoka. Hisoka looks so distraught, her eyes brimming with tears as she continues to frantically dig through Miu's bag. She's purposefully avoiding everyone's gaze. Especially Mio's.

Had she known too…?

"Do you blame me for the pain those cameras have caused you and your mother?" Mio continues, deepening all of their confusion. "And all of your family that came before you? Your family's Camera Obscura, the one Miku was using here, it was passed down through generations, right? It's what drove Yae and your grandmother, Miku's mother, to..."

Miu lets out another growl, shaking her head in exasperation. "What? What are you talking about, why would I...?"

Hisoka finally finds what she's been fishing around for in Miu's bag: a sleek silk handkerchief. It's not as absorbent as a bandage or even just a cotton cloth, but it will have to do. She gently presses the handkerchief to Miu's nose, trying to stem the blood flow.

Miu half-heartedly paws at her hand and whines at her, a weak noise that almost sounds like her name; it comes out sounding a lot more like a whimper of *'soka* with the handkerchief in the way. Hisoka ignores her, tucking her hair back as Yuri continues to hold her up,

whispering to her to keep her head leaned forward. Miu grumbles at her but finally gives in, holding Hisoka's hand as it holds the cloth against her face.

Despite the intensity of the conversation, Mio has a soft, affectionate look in her teary eyes as she watches them.

That doesn't stop her from blindsiding them with what she reveals next.

"I am a descendant of Dr. Asou too. Asou Kunihiko. The reason those cameras exist. "

All three girls freeze and stare at her.

It takes a moment, but Miu finally starts to stumble over her words, trying to snap herself out of it. Her frustration is growing again, still mixed with incredulity. "How could I possibly blame you for that? You had nothing to do with it!"

"Then how could I blame you or your mother for your ancestor's actions?" Mio argues.

"It's not the same!"

"Miu," Mio whispers firmly, her voice dropping to something incredibly broken but so sincere. "There's never going to be a time when I don't wish that my sister was here. There's never going to be a time when I don't miss her. What happened that night... It was like a hole was cut through me. We were two parts of a whole. But... I still carry her memory with me, everywhere I go."

More than that, Yuri thinks. Again, she keeps the thought to herself. She focuses on holding onto Miu and listening to Mio's voice as she helps Miu through her pain.

"That's how I found the strength to live on. Even with the pain. I carry her here, right here," Mio's hand finds her heart, fingers nearly digging into her own sternum, "with me, always. Your mom, Rei, taught me that too. And she and my uncle stayed with me the whole time, reminding me that I'm not alone. The scars, *this* scar, will never go away. It will always be my burden to bear, but..." Her hand moves, finding her throat instead. Her fingers press down into the dimly glowing crimson mark.

Miu finally stumbles forward and out of Yuri and Hisoka's grasp. She falls against Mio, stealing her hand away.

Mio catches her, pulling her against her and holding on tight. "I'm still here. And I'm going to continue to be here for as long as I can. And while I'm still here, I'm really happy that you and Miku are here with me. We're connected. All of us. The Asous, the Amakuras, the Hinasakis, the Hikami Kurosawas– we're all connected by fate. We were meant to find each other. To share the burden of everything the world beyond has put us through. To help carry each other through."

Miu scrunches herself up in her arms, hiding her face. "I don't want to be like them. Like *him*. I don't want to run and leave a trail of pain that people will continue to suffer from long after I'm gone."

"You won't." Mio assures, sounding so certain. "Because we're going to face everything that comes next together. We'll never let you be alone again."

They breathe together for a second, trying to find peace in the depths of a fading nightmare. The echoes are still quiet and calm around them. Yuri vaguely wonders why. Whatever the reason, she's grateful that they are, grateful for the reprieve.

When their breathing has evened out and the tide has fallen away, Mio pulls back to check on Miu. The bleeding has finally stopped. Miu's brow is still furrowed and her shoulders are still slumped, but now she just looks completely drained.

Mio looks back up at Hisoka and Yuri. They both nod to her.

It's time to go home.

A sound catches their attention, echoing down the gaping cavern path from back the way they came. It starts soft in the distance but begins to grow louder, drawing closer and closer.

Something is underground with them.

They all share another look, trying to decide what to do. They're trapped. There's nowhere to run. They have no defenses except the spirit flashlight and the Camera Obscura, and those will only help if the threat is of the incorporeal variety.

Yuri and Mio step forward, shielding Miu and Hisoka, ready to hold the line anyway.

The sound is more distinct now– *footsteps*. Human footsteps, a small group of them. Yuri and Mio share yet another look. There are exceedingly few people who know this place exists– and even fewer who would know how to navigate down to where they are.

Yuri furrows her brow. Their tension should be easing. Instead, there's a swelling anxiety permeating the air, leaving it rife with a dread bordering on panic again.

When she glances back over her shoulder, she finds out why.

Miu looks *petrified*. She's frozen up, staring back down the path and trembling with fear as the footsteps draw closer and closer.

But she's not the only one the anxiety is pouring from.

Hisoka has turned completely pale too. Her eyes are wide and terrified, flickering between the direction of the sound and Miu.

At last their newcomers join them.

Miku and Rei appear at the end of the hallway, looking frantic with worry. The moment their eyes land on them, they call out for them, taking off at a sprint down the twisted hallway with Kei hot on their trail.

Yuri's vision flickers. Just for a split second.

As they're tearing through the torii gates and hanging ropes, she sees flashes of the past again– Rei chasing Miku, desperately trying to call her back to her.

This time, they're holding hands.

This time, neither gets left behind.

Miu has a look on her face as if she's about to fall completely into panic. She begins to shrink back, eyes brimming with tears. She opens her mouth as if she's going to try to explain–

Hisoka cuts her off. She steps in front of Miu, raising her hands up defensively. "Please don't be mad. It's my fault we came here–"

Like flash fire, Miu's panic turns back to outrage.

"Like hell it was!"

She grabs Hisoka's arm, causing her to flinch as if expecting to be struck. The flash fire immediately snuffs, falling to regret and concern instead. She wraps herself around Hisoka's arm again, trying to comfort her, meeting her gaze apologetically. Hisoka merely finds her hand resting on her arm, covering it with her own before they both turn to face it all together.

To their shock and surprise, the moment they're in reach, Rei and Miku just drag them both into their arms.

"Shhh, little girl, you don't have to do that. We've got you. Both of you." Rei whispers into Hisoka's ear, her voice sounding so heartbroken. She sees Hisoka. She knows what she's doing: she's trying to protect Miu from what she faced as a child. But Hisoka won't find that with them. Never. No matter what.

Hisoka remains stiff in her arms, her body still weary, her mind still racing and on edge. Then, finally, the tension breaks. Her eyes fill with tears too. She buries her face into Rei's shoulder and holds on tightly in return.

As they hold Miu and Hisoka, Miku blindly reaches out for Yuri, trying to find her hand. Yuri awkwardly steps closer to accept it. Both Rei and Miku turn to her with watery smiles, looking at her over their daughters' shoulders.

"You didn't throw yourself in front of anything dangerous this time, did you?" Rei fusses, giving her a look that's so deeply fond but also still a little worried, knowing her impulses and tendencies.

Yuri stops to think. Did she? She doesn't think so...

"...No?"

Miu and Hisoka both snort, giggling through their tears. Miku and Rei both sigh at her affectionately. Then they both turn their fussing towards Mio.

"Are you alright?" Rei starts, worriedly scanning her for injuries.

Mio looks a bit caught off guard but nods, stepping a little closer as well in the bright light provided by the lantern in her uncle's hand. It certainly fills the space more thoroughly than the spirit flashlight's narrow beam.

Miku catches her gaze. Looking her deep in the eyes, she whispers to her earnestly. "Thank you."

Mio brushes it off, shaking her head. "They didn't need me. They worked together and did everything all on their own. I didn't do anything."

Rei eyes the spirit flashlight in Mio's hand. A proud grin slowly spreads across her lips as she realizes Mio's long-standing fear has finally been triumphed over. And she did it all for her girls. "Yes, you did. You kept them safe." She reiterates her love's words just as earnestly. "Thank you."

Mio's expression finally softens. She fidgets beneath their heartfelt appreciation but doesn't argue further.

"You aren't mad at us?" Miu asks, even though she can clearly feel that they aren't. She seems perplexed, unsure of what to make of it. Why aren't they mad? Shouldn't they be?

Both of her mothers shake their heads.

"No, of course not," Miku starts, pulling back to meet her gaze directly. She's gently turning Miu's face in her hands, inspecting for any injuries.

"You scared us," Rei adds honestly, offering Hisoka a sincere but shaky smile when she pulls back to do the same. "But we're not mad."

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Miku looks between them once she deems Miu unharmed, visually doing the same with the other two. Her focus is set wholly on them and not the space around them or the crushed door standing just behind them.

Miu, Hisoka, and Yuri share a sheepish look but then nod.

"Well, almost everything..." Miu mutters, her shoulders falling a bit again.

Miku smiles wistfully and shakes her head. "Maybe some things are better off left unknown. We can't fix the past. We can only find peace and healing in the present."

"I know..." Miu grumbles but clearly isn't satisfied.

Mio nudges her, offering a small smile as well. "Come on. Let's go home."

"Preferably before this place comes down on our heads," Kei finally speaks up, staring up at the cracks in the cave ceiling.

They all grimace but wholeheartedly agree. They've had enough. They're ready to go home.

As Rei and Miku release their girls, Miku gives Mio another meaningful look, one that Mio meets just as earnestly. There's something knowing shining in both of their eyes.

It would seem Miku knows about the history between their families too.

"Hold on." Miu hesitates, glancing up worriedly at the ceiling as Kei's quip settles in her mind. She hadn't really noticed before, but now she's starting to rethink their current location in the unstable underground. Especially now that they're all together. She glances back at the crushed door. Then she huffs and begrudgingly begins to dig through her bag again. "Give me just a moment..."

She starts to pull out various familiar objects, things Yuri usually sees during their yearly hike up Mt. Hikami for the winter solstice: candles, ornaments, incense, rice, fresh water, flowers, and fruit. Offerings to soothe and honor the souls of those who have passed on.

This place is still a tomb, after all. Several people in Miu and Miku's family crossed over into what lies beyond here.

"Is all of that..." Mio watches as Miu pulls out item after item from her bag, impressed and amused but also a little bemused, "... just things you three carry with you at all times?"

Hisoka and Yuri share another sheepish look.

Miu shrugs, her brow scrunched in a slightly grumpy pout. "Not really. I knew we were visiting a grave. It would be rude not to bring something."

"That's very kind of you, Tiniest Rei." Kei's expression is surprisingly soft as he holds the lantern a little closer, helping her see inside her bag. He's not teasing this time. He looks genuinely grateful and fond. "I'm sure your uncle would have appreciated it."

Miu huffs again. She's trying not to take her irritation out on him. Still, she grumbles, almost under her breath, "It's not for *him*. It's for Kirie. Who's stuck with him for eternity."

Miku sighs, looking at her daughter, filled with gratitude and affection as well. Miu really is a fantastic actress. Her mother, however, can always see right through her.

"He was very kind, Miu..."

Miu glances up from her digging to give her mother an unhappy look. The sharpness in her expression softens only for her mother. Nevertheless, she reminds her simply, "He hurt you."

Yuri can almost feel what Miu is thinking. She doesn't need her sixth sense this time; she just knows her. She knows Miu.

Miu understands Mafuyu's decision now– she still doesn't agree with it, but she understands. She can even reluctantly commend him for his ultimate act of sacrifice, giving his life to soothe a lost spirit doomed to an eternity of suffering.

Her feelings towards him, however, remain conflicted.

She doesn't hate him. But she still doesn't necessarily much care for him or even really know him either. She's going to settle for begrudging appreciation and acceptance and leave it at that.

In the end, Mafuyu was Miku's brother. That may make him her uncle– in title– but he isn't the one who stayed. He isn't the one who chose their family, blood or not, over and over without fail. As far as Miu is concerned, she only has one uncle, and it's the man who spent nearly twenty years at her mother's side, trying to help bring her other mother back home, the one who is currently awkwardly offering to hold her bag for her as she continues to dig through it, retrieving the last handful of objects buried in its depths.

Not that she'll *ever* tell Kei. She'd never hear the end of it.

"I hurt you too. Both you and Rei…" Miku gently reminds Miu in return, her gaze falling remorsefully to the ground. Rei subtly winds an arm around her waist before not-so-subtly tugging her closer, pressing a soft kiss into the side of her head. Silent reminders of love and forgiveness from both of them– both her and Miu. She knows Miu feels the same and doesn't mind her offering them on her behalf.

"That's different." Miu scrunches her nose, finally fully looking up from what she's doing. "You were already dying. You were trying to protect us." She turns away, an armful of supplies precariously balanced in her hands as she crouches down to begin setting up a small altar.

Miku titters softly at her daughter's obstinacy and willfulness. She sends Rei an amused but still very fond glance, one that clearly states *she gets all of that from you.* Rei merely nods her head, decidedly not denying it.

Stepping forward with Rei firmly in tow, Miku crouches down beside Miu, taking some of the supplies to help. She smiles warmly when Miu looks over at her in surprise. "I'm just grateful that I'm getting the opportunity to make up for my mistakes."

Miu's expression softens again. She suddenly looks pensive, lost in thought as she stares up at the crushed door. Something about her mother's words makes her stop and consider something. Perhaps about how her uncle tried to make it up to her mother by remaining at her side in the casket until her rescue.

After a moment, she brushes it off and, like her other mother, merely nods.

Kei crouches down at Miu's other side, giving her a goofy smile as he offers his help as well. She returns it decidedly less goofily, rolling her eyes and handing him a candle to light. They build the little altar together, well-versed after all of their practice honoring the lost souls of Mt. Hikami. They hope it's enough to soothe the souls that were lost here too.

When it's finished, they rise and step away, returning to the others.

Miku doesn't linger on the crushed door. She turns from it to take Miu's hand and Rei's arm with a brave smile. She's making the choice to walk away on her own this time, in full mind

and spirit– no supernatural influence forcing her to chase after ghosts she knows will never return. It's all she ever wanted in the first place, and it's all she still wants now.

She's choosing the people she loves, the ones still with her.

She's choosing to live.

Together, they make their way back to the surface, leaving the echoes of the past and a few thoughtful offerings behind them.

***

In the darkness left in their absence, the candles flicker.

He can't abdicate from his sworn duty at his priestess's side, but he smiles softly as he watches them go. It would seem his endeavor to save his little sister succeeded. Her soul is bright and stronger than ever, interwoven with her soulmate's. She looks truly happy. Their family curse has finally been broken.

Perhaps, someday in the far and infinite future, they'll meet again. Perhaps they'll be able to do so freely, without the burden of fleeting time weighing heavily on their shoulders, keeping them separated across planes. In the meantime, knowing she's safe and thriving in the world of the living with a loving and devoted family of her own is enough to keep them strong, filling the cold darkness surrounding the Hell Gate with the light and warmth of hope.

He couldn't be more proud.

His priestess is very proud too.

***

As they depart, returning the remains of the mansion to its solitude, they remain close, helping and watching out for each other until they're finally well beyond its sprawling grounds. As soon as it's far behind them, however, and they're walking down the path that will lead them back to their cars, they break off into smaller groups: Miku walks with Miu, Rei walks with Hisoka, and Yuri, watching over them from behind, walks with the two Amakuras.

Once more, she's sort of the odd one out.

But Mio and Kei make sure she's not alone. After all, they both know what it's like to be the ones left behind. They won't let anyone they care about feel that way ever again.

Of course, Yuri's not *really* being left behind here– the rest of their family is just a few steps ahead. The Amakuras stay beside her regardless, walking with one on either side.

Yuri finds she doesn't mind. In fact, it's kind of nice. She's not alone, and she gets to keep an eye on her favorite people. She's trying not to eavesdrop, but the quiet of the forest carries their conversations back to her, making them impossible not to overhear.

“Hey, Mom?” Miu starts, calling for her attention as they walk side by side. She's been holding her mother's hand since they left the mansion. At Miku's soft, curious hum, she continues, "I'm really proud of you."

Miku tilts her head, looking over in surprise before scrunching her brow in confusion. She ponders for a moment, trying to figure out what she could have possibly done to warrant such a high honor. Finally, she gives in. "For what?"

"Making it easy for me to follow in your footsteps." Miu is looking straight ahead and down the path, avoiding her mother's gaze, but her head is held high. The pride she speaks of is more than evident in her eyes.

"I–" Miku stares at her, clearly deeply moved by her admission. Then the soft look melts into a look of earnest resolve. "I made you a promise. I'm sorry it took so long, but I'm here now, and I intend to keep it."

"I know.” Miu finally turns to her, offering a warm smile and reminding her so sincerely, “I believe you.”

Yuri smiles, proud of both of them too.

Then, her attention is pulled towards the Kurosawas. Rei seems to be giving a little bit of extra care to Hisoka. Yuri can tell her love is still worried that Rei might be mad at her– or worse, *disappointed*.

Funnily enough, they seem to be having a very similar conversation to the Hinasakis, only in reverse. Rei has her arm around Hisoka's shoulder, tugging her into a sideways embrace as they make their way back towards their vehicles. She presses a tender kiss into the side of Hisoka's head, overflowing with pride and affection for her eldest.

"Proud of you."

Downplaying her fears and herself, Hisoka shrugs. Her arms are folded in front of her chest as she looks off into the forest, avoiding Rei's doting gaze. She's not cold or distant, not in the least; she's just really nervous. "I didn't do anything..."

"You were looking out for your little sister, putting yourself on the line to make sure she stayed safe,” Rei counters with conviction. Then she sighs. “I know I can't always be there to protect you. Either of you. You two have already been through so much. But you both are so strong. You take care of each other," then she chuckles, turning her gaze to the sky peeking through the canopy overhead, not thinking much of it, "I worry less when I know my daughters are together."

Hisoka subtly jolts. She finally turns to stare at Rei, her eyes beginning to fill with tears.

"Rei... I–"

Rei doesn't notice at first. She beams as she continues, "And with Yuri around, I worry even less. I know I can always count on her to take care of my girls– oh!"

Hisoka abruptly turns, burying herself in Rei's arms. Rei blinks in surprise.

Then her own words finally catch up to her. It's a bit awkward as they continue to make their way down the path, but she holds Hisoka just as fiercely in return.

Yuri's smile grows. Even from her place in the background, it's always such a comfort to see them all healing together.

A gentle nudge to her side draws her attention away from her favorite people. She turns to find Mio staring at her intently, a thoughtful expression on her face.

“You know we were always meant to find you too, right?” Mio starts, looking at her earnestly, “You're pretty much already Kurosawa, after all. For better or for worse, you were selected by the same mountain that granted the surname to Rei and Hisoka's ancestor…” then she huffs a small laugh, not even bothering to hide her amusement, “Not to mention, you two already act like a married couple. You two really are just as bad as Rei and Miku…”

Kei hums, playfully raising an eyebrow. “I don't know… Tiny Rei might still take Kozukata. The jury is still out."

A familiar debate. One that seems to provide endless entertainment to Kei, Mio, and Miu.

Unfortunately for Yuri, she's the one caught in the middle this time. She looks between them like a fawn caught in the headlights.

"I…”

They both just chuckle, both reaching out to ruffle her hair. She sighs, wondering if it's too late to change her mind about hanging in the back with them.

Finally, the cars come into view, waiting patiently for their return on the dirt path that will eventually lead them back to civilization. They agree to meet at the Kurosawa/Hinasaki Residence, where the three younger girls will be staying the night. It's a bit closer than the antique shop, and they could all use some well-deserved rest.

As Kei is climbing into his car, he calls over to his niece as she is climbing into her own. “Oh, by the way… what's this I hear that you've started seeing someone?”

Mio rolls her eyes before grumbling out warningly, “Kei… don't be so nosy…”

Rei perks up, peeking over at Mio eagerly from over the top of Kei’s car as well. "It's Hikari, right? When are we getting introduced?”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Mio sighs deeply. "Rei... It's not like that. We're just friends..."

Rei and Kei share a look as if they don't believe it one bit.

Joining in as she climbs into the backseat of Kei's car, Miku calls out sweetly, “Well, whenever you're ready, we'd all love to meet this ‘friend' of yours.”

Rei watches Miku for a moment, a soft and lovestruck look on her face. She shuts the front passenger door without getting in. She follows Miku into the backseat instead, ignoring Kei's scoff of *what am I, a chauffeur?*

Mio’s expression softens. She nods, genuinely considering Miku's words.

While their elders are bantering, the three younger girls pile into the back of Mio's car, following suit with their mothers and foregoing the front passenger seat. They're all exhausted but relieved, grateful to be heading home. It's so much quieter out in the forest, far away from the echoes. They're already starting to doze off as the voices of their loved ones become the only thing washing over them.

Yuri sits in the middle this time. Hisoka curls into her, resting her head on her shoulder. Her eyes flutter shut. All of the tension in her body dissipates, safe and content at last.

Miu sighs, leaning heavily into Yuri's side too. She still seems a little disappointed. Yuri looks over at her and tilts her head, asking a silent question. Miu shrugs before resting her head on Yuri's other shoulder, mirroring Hisoka, before finally offering a response. "We never found out why the rift opened in the first place."

They just couldn't see that far back through the echoes. Either their powers, even combined, weren't strong enough, or the echoes themselves no longer exist. Perhaps they were too late. Perhaps they faded a long time ago.

Hisoka keeps her eyes closed, resting but listening attentively. She tries to offer some comfort, discomforted by Miu's disappointment. "Maybe your mom is right. Maybe some things are better left unknown." Miu hums, still not soothed, so she continues, "We can speculate all we want, but we might never truly know the truth about how the other side comes to touch our world. Dr. Asou devoted his whole life to it and, as far as we know, still never uncovered the whole truth. Even his ‘most complete’ prototype was flawed."

"Isn't that why you studied Mt. Hikami though? And its religion?" Miu counters, more curious than argumentative. "You have all those books in your library. You once wanted to know everything about it. You wanted to understand..."

Hisoka finally peeks an eye open. She sighs as well and nods, sounding a little wistful. "And look where that got me..."

"*Hey*," Miu scolds, furrowing her brow, "none of that was your fault."

"Maybe so," Hisoka acquiesces, unconsciously toying with Yuri's fingers as they hold hands. "But I could have also been a bit more careful about it. It started with wanting to know more about our heritage, about where we came from and our sixth sense. But then I got reckless and pushed too deep. My mentor always warned me–"

Yuri suddenly stiffens, interrupting them both.

She sees it again. A fluttering of glowing red.

They both follow her intense gaze to find it fixed on the car's side mirror. The reflection should only show Mio, still conversing with her uncle, Rei, and Miku.

But that's not all it shows.

There's a girl, one who looks almost identical to Mio, standing right beside her, looking back at them through the mirror. She looks as if she's in her teens and holds onto Mio’s arm as if she's guiding her or holding her steady.

Her form flickers a few times in the fading light. Perhaps holding a visible form is difficult. Perhaps that's why they rarely see her like this. Mio clearly doesn't feel her there. She doesn't even seem to be able to sense her. She's still very much unaware of her sister's lingering presence.

The girl waves at them, her eyes filled with affection and gratitude. Her smile is warm like Mio’s when she's happy and crooked like her uncle's when he's being playful. Placing a single finger on her lips, she makes a silent request. They instantly understand exactly what she's asking of them.

Her form flickers once more. Her strength must be waning. In the next blink, she vanishes, disappearing somewhere back inside Mio, they can only presume. As soon as she appeared, she's gone again, hiding and resting until the next time she's needed.

Yuri, Hisoka, and Miu share a look. Then, they just smile.

Her secret is safe with them.

***

After about an hour of driving, the road finally turns back to pavement. Mio sighs in relief. She can see the taillights of her uncle's car in front of her, twin red beacons cutting through the darkness, guiding her out of the forest. It's a comfort to see. Her uncle and dear friends are just ahead.

Glancing back through the rearview mirror, she can see all three of the younger girls are already fast asleep. Hisoka and Miu have both cuddled into Yuri, still clinging to the girl even as they sleep.

Mio chuckles softly as she watches over them. Yuri really has taken up Hoshi's mantle, providing comfort and safety for both of Rei's girls. Like her predecessor, Yuri takes her job very seriously.

For a moment earlier, Mio had considered making the same lame joke her uncle had told to their mothers: some playful quip about their choice to pile in the back together and leave her up front to drive them home all alone. She really does feel like a chauffeur. It's kind of lonely.

But they looked so exhausted and comfy together back there.

She held her tongue. They trust her. Rei and Miku trust her. She'll make sure they get home safely.

The long drive leaves her alone with her thoughts though. She's not sure if that's a good thing. It hasn't always been in the past, but it's been getting easier lately.

Well, she supposes she's not *completely* alone.

She's never completely alone.

It's been a while since she's talked to her. They used to talk all the time, but it gets hard when all of their conversations feel one-sided. She got frustrated with the silence and gave up. She didn't mean to be so distant. She hopes she's not mad. She's going to make it up to her from now on. She promises.

She's got time. She might as well start.

Keeping her voice nearly inaudible, careful not to disturb her peacefully sleeping passengers, she whispers to the car and the darkness, the dashboard lights and the quiet whir of the air conditioner. Despite everything, she still believes with her whole heart that she can hear her somehow.

"Mayu...? I'm sorry. I know it's been a while. You know how I get sometimes. I'll do better from now on…"

***

A flicker of red flashes in the rearview mirror, subtle and completely unseen.

The front passenger seat is colder than the rest of the car. No one notices. Not even Mio. The girls in the back stir slightly, sensing her presence, but they're all too exhausted to be fully roused from their restful slumber.

They all did so well today.

She's so proud of them.

Hisoka is all grown up now, a fierce and compassionate young woman like Rei. She was always such a perceptive little girl, as intuitive and sensitive as she was gentle and sweet. She's carried those traits into adulthood and now has a beautiful life to show for it, filled with warmth and love.

It's interesting to see her younger sister is so similar to her, despite growing up worlds apart.

Like her sister, Miu sure is a stubborn little one. It must be a Kurosawa thing. The girl keeps reaching out for her, chasing her even though she's been gently reprimanded several times. She keeps trying anyway, determined and undeterred.

But Miu loves Mio. It's hard to stay cross with her when she so desperately wants to help.

And then there's Yuri.

Those two girls simply adore her. Mio is truly fond of her too. Who could have guessed that Hoshi, their brave and kindhearted plush fox, would have a kindred spirit in the world, and that Hisoka would fall in love with her, bringing her into all of their lives where she's always been meant to be?

Fate is funny like that.

She has to be extra careful revealing herself around Yuri though; she's by far the most sensitive of them all.

She has her reasons for remaining hidden. One of the most demanding being that she can't surface often, especially when the rift between realms is at its strongest. It's then that she must rest, recovering her strength so that she can return to her duty to protect when it wavers and wears thin.

Like Yuri, she has a very important job too. She takes it just as seriously.

The most vital reason, however, is Mio.

Mio can't sense her. She's tried to reach her in the past, calling out to let her know that she's still here. Her efforts have always gone in vain. She thinks it's because Mio's wounds are still too deep. She isn't ready. She might never be ready.

But Mayu is okay with that.

The important thing is that they're together. Just like they always promised.

There are things she wishes were different, things she wishes she could change. When Sae invaded her mind, they disagreed on a lot of things. Particularly regarding their methods of remaining close to their sisters. Mayu never wanted Mio to do the things she was forced to do. She never wanted her to suffer like that.

She can admit she was afraid for a while. Afraid that they'd die separately, alone and apart. It was a fear she carried with her, hidden deep in her heart, for a very long time.

But Mio was always with her.

After facing their fears together, she wasn't scared anymore. She still wanted them to remain together for as long as they were allowed on this plane. But not like this. Never like this.

She never wanted to become one. That was Sae’s wish. A wish that was forced onto them, becoming their reality.

But what happened happened. It can never be undone.

All she can do now is stay, watching over them whenever they find themselves back in the darkness– either literally or lost deep in their minds.

To answer Mio's question, of course she's not mad.

Mio talks to her more than she realizes. Especially when she's stressed or scared. Just because her mind isn't addressing her directly doesn't mean that her heart isn't. They still talk all the time.

And though she was very stressed and scared today, Mio was very brave too. She faced her fears to keep the little ones safe. Her wounds are finally starting to close.

Mayu's very proud of her too.

As they drive through the night, the crimson butterfly sits beside her sister, keeping her company and listening as she quietly talks– about life, about friends, about family, about love, and about the future. It's all things she knows already, but she listens anyway. While Mio talks, spilling her heart, Mayu helps her keep an eye on the little ones in the back, chasing away nightmares and soothing their weary minds, still aching from delving into the shadows fated to be forgotten in time.

She'll keep watching out for them, all of them, always.

After all, for better or for worse, through heartache and joy, sorrow and triumph, this is her destiny. She may not have chosen it, but as long as she's here, she's going to keep choosing them– their friends and their family– for the rest of her and Mio's days.

One day Mio will hear her voice again. Mayu believes it with her whole heart.

Until then, she'll just keep listening.

Chapter End Notes

(:

Thanks for reading! See you in the next one!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!